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CITY KIDS IN THE WILDERNESS: A SELF-STUDY OF CRITICAL OUTDOOR EDUCATION  
APPROACHES

by

Tom Mackey

A dissertation  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy: Environmental Interpretation  
State University of New York  
College of Environmental Science and Forestry  
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## Abstract

T.J. Mackey. *City Kids in the Wilderness: A Self-Study of Critical Outdoor Education Approaches* 152 pages, 3 figures, 2020. APA style guide used.

Outdoor and environmental educators are increasingly concerned about the presence and resistance of whiteness, racism, and settler colonialism in outdoor pedagogy. In this dissertation, I present three distinct inquiries examining the entanglement of educator identity, curriculum, anti-colonialism, and anti-racism in outdoor and environmental education (OE/EE). All three manuscripts are united by self-study, which is a methodology whereby educational professionals make inquiries of and investigate their own practice. In chapter one I use an action research framework and discourse analysis to better theorize my anti-oppressive outdoor curriculum design. Through this analysis, I uncover my tendency to position critical educators at high levels of consciousness and ignore the complexity of learners' meaning-making processes. Subsequently, I shifted towards strategies that placed participants in conversation with entities of place. This curricular approach decenters educators' singular interpretations of injustice, which is an important theoretical concept for critical outdoor education. Chapter two uses autoethnographic methodology and applies performativity theory to analyze this same professional journey but from the perspective of educator identity. Here I describe a narrative in which my work and education forced me to 1) notice how my wilderness performativity enforced inequity and 2) acknowledge different outdoor performativities as expressions of different values of place. Ultimately, I use my journey to delineate a major lesson for outdoor educators: as we seek to incorporate justice and anti-oppression into our work, we should see ourselves as non-neutral agents with regards to place. Chapter three makes a case for the broader application of self-study in OE/EE; as we create anti-oppressive or social justice curriculum in OE/EE, it is important that educators and organizations have tools to reflexively examine their relationships to learners and places. With its focus on ontology, self-study is a well situated but underrecognized tool for such reflexivity. All three chapters arrive

at a complex valuation of 'place as teacher' and I believe this notion implicates all outdoor professionals. It is important that the way we relate to place in our pedagogy grapples with the complexity and non-neutrality of place.

Key Words: outdoor education, wilderness education, environmental education, critical pedagogy of place, diversity, self-study, nonformal education, anti-racist education

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## INTRODUCTION

In their revolutionary analysis, Wattchow and Brown (2011) asserted that many of the values that guide the field of outdoor education, after decades of stasis, are shifting. Whereas outdoor educators and adventure organizations have traditionally centered the learner's activity during backcountry sports and adventure challenges, the concept of social-ecological place is becoming increasingly important. This shift reflects increasing awareness of the role outdoor education and environmental education (OE/EE) can play in supporting and combating the social inequities and environmental degradation that construct the landscapes in which we work.

As I have worked through my doctoral program, I have witnessed this transition gain momentum. While Wattchow and Brown (2011) take a broad approach to social change, and rarely go into detail about the individual power structures that threaten justice, less than ten years later it is much more commonplace to hear outdoor practitioners call out and attack specific manifestations of oppression like environmental racism, toxic masculinity, and settler colonialism. In 2014 when I decided to begin my PhD. and also began protesting with the Black Lives Matter Syracuse Chapter, those of us concerned about oppression in outdoor and environmental education (OE/EE) occupied a marginal spot within the outdoor community. I recall several organizations creating bland statements supporting inclusion and diversity, but in ways that avoided naming movements or specific problems. Conversely, as I write this introduction in 2020, the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) (2020) links to an article entitled "Resources for anti-racism" at the top of their home page, The Wilderness Society (2019) has recently released a public lands curriculum that teaches how American public land policies participate in the genocide of indigenous people, and many of the major professional organizations that populate outdoor education have specifically declared solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement (Judge, J. & Appalachian Mountain Club, 2020; iNaturalist, 2020; North American Association for Environmental Education, 2020; Williams, J. & the Wilderness Society, 2020). Additionally, the last five years alone have produced an explosion of

organizations focused on the visibility of diverse participation and diversity issues in the outdoors (for examples see: Brown People Camping, 2020; Diversify Outdoors, 2018; Fat Girls Hiking, 2020; LatinxHikers, 2018; Melanin Base Camp, 2020, Terraincognita Media, 2020), the establishment of nonprofits for the advocacy of diversity in the outdoors (for example see: In Solidarity Project, 2020), and the emergence of consulting opportunities for outdoor companies who want to engage diversity issues ( for example see: Indigenous Women Hike, 2020).

While I did not intend for my dissertation to capitalize on this momentum, it is impossible to avoid it. In fact, it is likely that my arrival at social justice and anti-oppression in OE/EE was driven by widely shared social experiences in ways of which I remain unaware. Still, regardless of how I became invested in them, these movements have changed the framing of my research. While I initially set out to convince others that OE/EE needs broader attention to racism and settler colonialism, I eventually found myself writing for those entering the work of anti-oppression. It has become increasingly important that as we pursue diversity, equity, and justice, our efforts must remain unpalatable to the racist and classist assumptions that initially inspired these shifts in OE/EE. I worry that anti-racism and social justice will go the way of once radical terms like ‘tolerance’ and ‘non-violence,’ which are now wielded by racists in order to deflate anti-racist movements. It is extremely important that we are attentive to concepts (like racial color-blindness) that will be invented and deployed to rhetorically appear anti-racist but never confront the racist ideology that permeates our culture. Such vigilance requires mechanisms by which we can examine our own theories and assumptions in reflection of our work, which is what I have attempted to do for myself through this dissertation. The following three manuscripts provide insight for outdoor educators and organizations interested in the entanglement of educator identity, curriculum, practice, anti-colonialism, and anti-racism. Specifically, my original contributions are a modern refurbishment of anti-oppressive outdoor pedagogy, a case study of a white outdoor educator’s identity development, and the theorization of self-study as a tool for educators pursuing anti-oppression in their work.

## **Framing Social Change in Outdoor and Environmental Education**

White, able-bodied men (like myself) have long dominated the fields of OE/EE (Deluca & Demo, 2008; Lawrence Hall of Science & Youth Outside, 2019; Rose & Paisley, 2012). While this is as much an issue of representation of the diversity that does make up our field as it is of the demographics of participation, white men make up a majority of the authors that are read in outdoor/environmental educator preparation and have been more likely to hold positions of authority in OE/EE (Garvey, 1990; James, 1996; Warren, 2005). This problem can be interpreted in a number of ways. First, it is an issue of accessibility and barriers. Opportunities to learn and participate in many backcountry activities are not evenly distributed across our racially segregated country (Askew & Walls, 2019), and, because of the racially motivated violence that characterizes much of American rural history, safety in backcountry areas is not as assured for people of color as it is for white people. Yet the dominance of white men can also be seen as a reflection of values and ideology. Concepts that are part of the foundation of OE/EE, especially wilderness, were invented and have been employed by white settlers first to justify the spread of civilization and then to force the opening of native land to recreational use by white Americans (Deluca & Demo, 2008; Laitala, 2008; Spence, 1999). Furthermore, environmental justice scholars and activists have pointed out that popular American environmentalism and its pedagogical branch, environmental education, have continually failed to address the environmental concerns of people of color and poor folks, thereby perpetuating environmental inequity (Bullard, 1990; Carter, 2006; Finney, 2014). Taken together, these problems construct a characterization of OE/EE that has been inattentive and often complicit in American racism and classism.

As stated earlier, OE/EE has recently been active in addressing these inherent hegemonies. Still, the theoretical basis for social justice oriented or critical outdoor education is sprawling and requires deeper attention. As Brown and Wattchow (2011) state, much of the theoretical basis for justice-oriented OE/EE is derived from place-based education. Gruenewald

(2003) proposed a critical pedagogy of place whereby participants learn to critique colonial and other oppressive narratives of place (decolonization), like those inherent to the wilderness idea, and in doing so open opportunities for more just relationships with land (reinhabitation). Yet critical pedagogy of place draws significant influence from ecojustice education. In defining ecojustice, Bowers (2001) posits that much environmentalism serves the interests of settler colonialism by restricting the environmental agency of marginalized communities. In this oppressive frame, poverty, urbanity or race are seen as causes of ecological degradation, and therefore the cultural autonomy of poor, urban, or racially oppressed communities is denied. For this reason, OE/EE is normed into a restrictive set of values, which we may call 'mainstream environmentalism,' that do not and cannot represent all the cultural environmental relationships. More recently, the field of land education reworked, united, and reiterated many of the threads of critical pedagogy of place and ecojustice education. Land education is a place-based approach that privileges indigenous knowledge, agency and title, and reconceives relationships with place through anti-colonial critique (Calderon, 2012; Tuck et al., 2014). Ultimately land education seeks to "theorize pathways to living as separate sovereignties on shared territory" (Tuck et al., 2014, p. 19). In this way, land education does not ask populations to unite behind their place the way Gruenewald's (2003) notion of reinhabitation does, but, through the deconstruction of settler-colonial hierarchies, to make room for multiple communities to complexly engage with place and address conflicts equitably.

Wattchow and Brown (2011) ultimately propose 'place-responsive' outdoor pedagogy as an alternative to traditional OE/EE. As opposed to place-based education, which may approach local stories and ecology simply as extra content areas to teach, place-responsive outdoor education works on the relationships between participants and place. While a loaded concept, the term 'place' typically encompasses all the past and present interactions among humans, between humans and all parts of ecosystems, and among all parts of ecosystems in a particular

location. Cultural and ecological narratives, as well as narratives of conflict, are integral to education for place.

## **Research Summary**

In chapter one I delineate my own conception of place-responsive and justice oriented pedagogy. However, this was not a broad theoretical framework for OE/EE but a curriculum specifically created for my work as the wilderness director at The Fiver Children's Foundation, a non-profit youth development organization serving youth ages 8-18 living below the poverty line in New York City and Madison County, New York. Fiver is deeply intentional, with a progressive theory of change revolving around three core outcomes: Civic Mindedness, Healthy and Ethical Life Choices, and Education and Career Success (Fiver Children's Foundation, 2013). In terms of implementation, Fiver offers year-round programming in diverse aspects of life including emotional wellness, ethics, college/career preparedness, public speaking, environmental education, and health. A cornerstone of Fiver programming is Camp Fiver, a rural sleep-away camp in Central New York, which all participants have the option to attend (free of charge) for two weeks every summer. The OE program studied here is called 'Wilderness' and operates out of this summer camp; all participants of a certain program stage (usually around 15-16 years old), are required to prepare for and attend a four-day outdoor backpacking trip in order to progress to the next program stage. While on the wilderness trip, participants work together to navigate between pre-determined camping areas among other significant sites including the summit of a mountain. My role is to teach participants backcountry skills for four days before the trip, then lead the trip for the following four days.

The three chapters that make up this dissertation are the product of a self-study of my practice in light of anti-oppression and justice-informed analyses of OE/EE as well as concern for my specific participants. The next section will summarize this methodology and describe how it unites the three analyses performed for this research.

### ***Self-study of Outdoor Education Practice***

Self-study firmly asserts that educational practitioners are knowledge-producers; educators become experts by doing the work of education and their understandings are as important as those produced by external observation. Through self-study, educational professionals make inquiries of and investigate their practice. Frequently self-study begins with confusions, questions, and struggles that practitioners have about their work. Then the professional designs methodology and data collection methods. For example, my dissertation uses action-research and autoethnography to help me grapple with central concerns of my practice.

One important feature of self-study that distinguishes it from other participatory methodologies is its ontological stance (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009); the ultimate objectives of self-study are to better the lives of students and teachers. However, this ontological framing is subject to the values of the practitioner; understanding what is 'good' for learners requires that educators explore the role of specific power structures like racism, sexism and classism, in cultivating their beliefs regarding their work. Therefore, self-study is also a means of helping educators confront issues of bias and oppression, as well as enact equity and justice through their work (for examples see: Berg, 2012; Johnston-Parsons et al., 2007; Soslau and Bell, 2018). In a broader research context, this type of inquiry, where practitioners reflect upon the function and impact of their work and subsequently make changes to their practice based on this reflection, is often called 'reflexivity' and there is significant demand for it across professional disciplines (Feucht et al. 2017).

The conceptualization of self-study that I performed on the Fiver wilderness program is inclusive; observation, evaluation and experimentation were possible approaches to answering questions about my practice but were continually mediated and guided by reflexive analyses. This reflexivity necessarily refers to the process whereby educators account for thoughts and feelings that guide their work and analyze them through "the broader context of the socio-



political forces within which we work” (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009, p. 57). In this way, race, class, gender, age and all other markers of identity mediate the relationships between education professionals and students. Subsequently, through self-study, I experiment with my role in these relationships for better ontological results.

### ***My Self-study Objectives***

The professional dilemma from which my self-study originated began with my sense that my OE goals, which were largely informed by conventions of OE/EE, did not seem to resonate with Fiver participants. Generally, I struggled to get them to ‘appreciate’ the outdoors the way I wanted and posited that this had something to do with major differences in life experience; I grew up with the privileges of being white (including access to wilderness) in a white-dominant context in a financially stable home while most of my participants did not. Yet an important turn in my work occurred as I began to perceive participant’s connection to nature not as a privilege that they didn’t have, but reflective of a divergent set of environmental values that are marginalized by broader environmental movements. Subsequently, I began to adjust my practice in what I perceived to be critical, justice oriented, and anti-oppressive ways. Still, I remained unsure about what my OE program could provide participants that would better their well-being. With this ontological starting point, I gathered data in the form of semi-structured participant pre- and post- interviews (appendix A), interviews with staff who were involved in the program (appendix B), participant semi-structured journals (where journal entries had specific prompts) (appendix C), group reflection sessions in which participants communally debriefed the trip with my supervisor and myself, a personal journal, and a timeline of my narrative as it relates to the outdoors. In accordance with an assigned Syracuse University institutional review board, written consent was obtained from participants/guardians for interviews, reflection sessions and journals separately. Pseudonyms are used to reference all participants, and the list matching participants to pseudonyms was destroyed upon completion of this manuscript.

The first two chapters analyze data from two distinct methodological perspectives. In chapter one I use an action research framework and discourse analysis to better theorize my social justice and anti-oppressive curriculum design, which I call a 'critical outdoor education' (COE). Action research is used to study social processes, particularly as people and organizations go through changes. Therefore, the inquiry in chapter one specifically seeks to characterize the meaning we (i.e. my participants, my co-workers, and I) make through evolving curriculum so that educators can draw implications for the practice of COE. Chapter two documents this same professional journey but approaches it from the perspective of my identity development as an educator. Here I use autoethnographic methodology and performativity theory to critique and reconceptualize cultural assumptions about justice/anti-oppression in OE/EE. This is accomplished by analyzing the influence of my cultural context on my OE/EE practice. This analysis pays special attention to ways I have performed whiteness in my OE work and considers how I can and do support justice through my performativity as an educator.

I decided to approach my self-study from these two distinct angles (i.e. curriculum inquiry in chapter 1 and educator identity in chapter 2) because they provide important complementing perspectives about social change in OE/EE. My initial intent was to complete an entire dissertation about COE curriculum design and evaluation. However, as I began to interrogate the theory of my COE, it became clear that many of my pedagogical goals were heavily filtered through my evolving understanding of OE/EE, some of which started to feel problematic with regards to ontology and the benefits obtained by learners. Examining my narrative through critical theories became a pertinent task. Therefore, chapter one constructs knowledge concerning the evolution of COE curriculum, while chapter two describes the journey that necessarily accompanies such philosophical shifts in practice.

Chapter three uses the first two chapters as well as methodological theory to make a case for the use of self-study in OE/EE. I argue that as we create anti-oppressive curriculum or

best practices for social justice in OE/EE, it is important that educators and organizations have tools for reflexivity. Self-study is a well situated but underrecognized tool for reflexivity in OE/EE.

It is important to note that chapters 1 and 2 may be most relatable to white outdoor educators than others. While I do believe my research career will produce more generalizable implications that address media exposure, economic barriers, safety barriers, and all other tools that marginalize people in the outdoors, I chose to take my dissertation as an opportunity for a much needed personal accounting. Many of the realizations that caused major changes to my pedagogy are entwined with the privilege of not always having to perceive the systems of oppression that mediate my life. In this way, aspects of the knowledge 'produced' through this dissertation may already be exceedingly apparent to any person of color working in OE/EE.

However, all three chapters arrive at a complex valuation of 'place as teacher' and I believe this notion relates to all outdoor professionals. OE/EE implicates settler colonial systems that have erased the unique histories, environmental values, and ecology that are important to places. Many educators have obtained specific benefits from these systems, even as they decrease the sustainability of our species. It is important that the way outdoor and environmental educators handle place in our pedagogy grapples with the complexity and non-neutrality of settler colonialism. Each of the following chapters provides a different approach to educator-learner-place relationships and come together to paint a picture of the modern revolution that OE/EE is experiencing.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **City Kids in the Wilderness: Action Research for Critical Outdoor Education**

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## **Abstract**

As a field, outdoor education is increasingly concerned about the presence and resistance of whiteness, racism, and settler colonialism in outdoor pedagogy. This study is a curriculum inquiry into an outdoor program (of mostly my design) that seeks justice and anti-oppression. I use an action research methodology and discourse analysis to better conceptualize the theory guiding this program. Through this investigation, I uncover my tendency to divide discourses about the outdoors into two categories: dominant and subjugated/counter. This habit of perceiving opposed dualities stems from my background in critical pedagogy, the rhetoric of which is common in much social justice literature. However, by dichotomizing this discourse I positioned educators at a higher level of consciousness and subsequently, ignored the complexity of my participants' meaning-making processes. Subsequently, I shifted towards strategies that placed participants in conversation with the entities involved in place, including indigenous nations, local settler communities, species, and other ecological agents. This decentered my singular interpretation of injustice and gave participants opportunities to engage with the complexity of place. I conclude that it is as important to help learners confront the complexity of the place-based relationships that are hidden by settler colonial values as it is to characterize systems of oppression for these learners.

*Keywords:* outdoor education, environmental education, place-based education, diversity, inclusion, critical pedagogy, critical pedagogy of place, critical pedagogy, outdoor education, action research

## Introduction

Motivation for the current study came as I encountered disjuncture between my goals and my impact over years of managing a wilderness education program for the Fiver Children's Foundation, a non-profit youth development organization serving adolescents living below the poverty line in New York City and Madison County, New York. I hoped that by trekking through rugged wilderness, my participants would cultivate love and appreciation for nature because those were the experiences of my youth that I attribute to my own passion for the environment. While there were occasional expressions of such love and appreciation, more often than not I encountered sentiments similar to Alison's (a teenage participant from my program):

Alison: I had fun here and really liked it although I was never made for nature so I probably most likely wouldn't do a wilderness trip again.

I often took sentiments like this to mean that participants failed to see the value of environmental protection or environmental advocacy, and this troubled me. Eventually I would critique my assumption that a distaste for wilderness recreation meant lack of concern for the environment, but this opened up even more questions about the values and objectives embedded in my practice.

Outdoor educators Rose and Paisley (2012) describe a similar sense of bewilderment in learning how their scholarship participants (i.e. mostly poor youth of color) experienced their wilderness programs. They write:

I couldn't believe, when I asked them what they'd gotten from the past three weeks, they hadn't responded as so many groups in the past had: they should have said that they learned teamwork, leadership, communication skills, and how to problem solve as a group and as individuals. Instead, they departed from this familiar narrative, and I didn't understand why.

Ultimately, Rose and Paisley's scholarship participants challenged some central assumptions about the benefits of outdoor adventure education.

Because I share such experiences of departure, I embarked on an intellectual journey first to help me understand why my participants made such divergent meaning during our outdoor excursions, and second to design and implement a more relevant outdoor education (OE) program. This study is a report along the way of this journey. It is what I perceive as the step after acknowledging what Rose & Paisley and others have pointed out: that program goals informed by foundational principles of OE tend to be more relevant to white and wealthy learners than to other learners, and that this is caused by OE's entrenchment in a cultural landscape that privileges the environmental history and perspectives of certain races, genders, and communities while neglecting others (Deluca & Demo, 2008; Fletcher, 2014; Newbery, 2012; Rose & Paisley, 2012). Here, an action research methodology is used to examine a wilderness program of my partial design, as I wrestle with the implementation of what I call a critical outdoor education (COE)- one that attempts to counter white and privileged narratives of land and encourage participants to inscribe narratives that are more relevant to their lived experience. In this way, the research problem is not that OE struggles with diversity, but that I was unsure of the appropriateness and effectiveness of my COE. This manuscript's original contribution to knowledge is the curriculum theory produced through an action research analysis of my experience implementing COE.

The central questions of this study are:

- 1) How do we (i.e. my participants, my co-workers, and I) construct meaning around our OE program as I attempt to implement a critical outdoor education (COE) approach?
- 2) What implications for practice can be drawn from this understanding of COE?

However, the action research methodology used here acknowledges that my program goals are subjective and dependent on conceptualization of my practice. A better representation of this study's inquiry would be:

How can I characterize the meaning we (i.e. my participants, my co-workers, and I) make about our OE program so *that* educators can draw implications for the practice of COE?

In this way, this study centers action more than the explanation of phenomenon.

Through this inquiry, I was able to perceive both shifts in and maintenance of dominant OE paradigms. This begs questions about how these discourses interact to create narratives of the outdoors and provides insight into how critical education functions as a practice with strong possibilities and drawbacks. Early analysis (described in the section entitled *Critical Pedagogy: Teaching Against the Pervasive*) supported a critical pedagogy approach whereby I asked participants to 1) critique popular environmental values for the hierarchies and oppression they promote, and 2) resist these value systems by promoting counter-narratives of place, especially environmental justice and indigenous worldviews. Later analysis exposed the limits of such a critical pedagogy framework. Dividing environmental values between dominant and subjected categories was demeaning to participants and co-workers who could entertain multiple valuations and exhibited more complex relationships to the outdoors. This begs for a more diffuse approach to liberatory outdoor pedagogy, which I offer through the curricular inclusion of entities of place (e.g. species, non-living ecological elements, past and present human communities, stories of place) into the social fabric of OE.

The following report will first define COE through the theoretical influences that guided the process. I will then delineate my positionality and work in relation to this research. Next, I will describe my methodology, data gathering process, and analysis. Finally, I will detail key discourses that emerged from the program and use them to draw implications for the further development of COE.

### **Literature Review: Theorizing a Critical Outdoor Education**

I borrow the word 'critical' from the multifaceted knowledge referred to as 'critical theory.' I choose this framing for the type of OE theorized here because it encompasses a diversity of

theories that critique social hierarchies and power structures (Deutscher & Lafont, 2017). I prefer this term to one reflecting a more specific body of theory like ‘land education’ or ‘critical pedagogy of place’ because this study is not an evaluation of a singular pedagogical method but is instead a holistic examination of a social process. The following sections will delineate and define COE through the diverse influences that have helped me grapple with a more appropriate and justice oriented program for my youth participants.

### **The Wilderness Idea**

Wilderness is a central concept to much OE, and is pertinent to the OE program that I design and lead for the Fiver Children’s Foundation, which is simply named ‘Wilderness.’ Over the last several decades, scholarship has positioned wilderness as an “idea” with a particular cultural heritage more than a positively identified space (Braun, 2002; Nelson and Callicott, 2008b). While characterizing wilderness in this way does not mean that human relationships with the outdoors cannot be individualized and diverse, there are many shared attitudes and values concerning wilderness that can be charted through popular movements, policy, and art.

In the Americas, wilderness emerged from a European colonial ideology to help settlers distinguish civilization from non-civilization. While attitudes towards and definitions of wilderness have changed over American history (Nash, 1967), wilderness has maintained several key qualities that construct settler nations’ relationships to land; it is devoid of human development, challenging to navigate, and distinct from human civilization (Conte, 2007). Value of this ‘untouched’ wilderness was and is the basis for many popular segments of American conservation, environmentalism, and environmental policy (Cronon, 1996).

The wilderness idea offered me an initial explanation for the divergence between my participant’s and my outdoor experience; wilderness belongs to a white-settler or European cultural heritage with which my participants may not identify. The wilderness idea facilitates my relationship to land because I was raised in and perceive numerous examples of white settlers, explorers, expeditionists, and other people who look like me using the wilderness idea to

understand the land on which I live. Being youth of color with slave or other non-European background, many of my participants may not see their people represented in the wilderness idea and their ancestors may have had very different value systems for relating to American land (Deluca and Demo, 2008; Finney, 2014). Therefore, practicing OE grounded in the wilderness idea could be considered a form of ethnocentrism.

Yet, ethnocentrism does not fully capture the understanding of oppression that provides the basis for COE. From an anti-colonial perspective, the wilderness idea not only helped settlers distinguish civilization from the surrounding wildness, but also provided justification for the erasure of such wildness and the people who lived therein (i.e. indigenous peoples) (Nash, 1967; M. Stoll, 2007; S. Stoll, 2007). The spread of civilization and the seizure of native land was God's will and America's destiny (M. Stoll, 2007). Even as white Americans began to value and protect wilderness for its moral benefits or recreation opportunities, the removal of native land title, erasure indigenous narratives of place, and genocide of native Americans progressed (Spence, 1999).

However, settler colonialism is not just a conflict between settlers and indigenous peoples but a hierarchy of identities and norms that implicate gender, ability, sexuality, and many other concepts that we use to identify ourselves. Race features prominently in analyses of modern settler societies. As an important example, Tuck and Yang (2012) remind us that African Americans are entwined in a distinct leg of the settler-native-slave triad with a unique environmental history. In Carolyn Finney's (2014) analysis of African American relationships to American natural spaces, she describes an intergenerational trauma beginning in the slave trade. Fear of the wilderness was an ideological tool wielded to keep Black slaves on plantations. Then during reconstruction through the civil rights era, white supremacist groups like the KKK used woodlands, parks, and fields to carry out murders and torture. Throughout this time, African American communities resisted the use of nature as a weapon and developed diverse environmental values broadly grounded in agriculture, justice and community (Smith,

2005). These ethics persist in both urban and rural areas and underpin many environmental initiatives like urban farming and environmental justice (Finney, 2014).

While we cannot generalize 'African American environmentalism' as one particular set of values, similar critiques of mainstream environmentalism emerge from Black environmental leaders like Bob Bullard (1990), Carolyn Finney (2014), and Majora Carter (2006). For all these scholars, wilderness movements, environmental policy, and popular environmental advocacy have neglected some principal environmental concerns of African Americans; namely environmental justice, just urban development, and safe access to outdoor recreation. Even environmentalists concerned with justice have subverted conversations about equity in outdoor recreation by relegating all Black environmental concerns to environmental justice realms (Finney, 2014). While these leaders do not speak for all Black Americans, they expose how the exclusion of justice and equity from popular environmentalism, including its obsession with wilderness, estranges many Black people and communities from environmental planning and policy.

On a broader scale, the example of African American environmental narratives teach us that, by centering the stories of white explorers, transcendentalists and expeditionists, the wilderness idea defines environmentalism without concern for equitable access to ecosystem services and environmental health. Therefore, wilderness marginalizes anyone who experiences environmental injustice, which include Indigenous peoples (Westra, 2008), Latinx Americans (Clean air task force & National Hispanic Medical Association, 2016), many immigrant groups (for examples see: Hernandez et al. 2015; Shah, 2012; Sze, 2011), and poor Americans (for example see: Buckley & Marrone, 2011). The wilderness idea may have little relevance for my participants of color; at best it does not distinguish white settler environmental history from the narratives of any other peoples in the Americas.

The exclusion enforced by modern wilderness is not passive ignorance. Rather, wilderness iterates its own supremacy and the supremacy of the people who are validated by it

because it is portrayed as culturally uncontested or neutral and wilderness advocates are seen as innocent in social conflict (McLean 2013; Newbery, 2012). Through this false neutrality, the wilderness idea can actively destroy indigenous lifeways, replace narratives surrounding the genocide of indigenous people, steal indigenous land, and dismiss all other cultural claims to natural spaces while still proclaiming moral superiority. For example, the construction of many parks and wilderness areas are justified through rhetoric promoting broad democratic access to the outdoors but have also required the active removal of indigenous peoples and poor communities (Spence, 1999). This process has often replaced sustainable place-based use of the environment with value systems that reify the purity of untouched nature (for example see Braun, 2002).

It is this cultural backdrop that colors a critical understanding of the various microaggressions and other expressions of racism that my participants and people of color experience in backcountry settings. A COE needs to be able to grapple with this complex and violent social-ecological history.

### **Outdoor Pedagogy**

In its most general sense, 'outdoor education' refers to any kind of structured and intentional education that occurs in an outdoor setting. However, it more commonly refers to outdoor adventure education, challenge courses, wilderness education, and (occasionally) environmental education.

The program analyzed here traditionally follows principles of outdoor adventure education. This field teaches participants a variety of skills associated with outdoor recreation in conjunction with wilderness 'experiences,' often as a means of empowerment, team building, and developing responsibility (National Outdoor Leadership School [NOLS], 2017; Outward Bound, 2020). The format of this education is diverse but commonly consists of multi-day trips into the 'backcountry,' or areas with minimal to no human development, and "containing



elements of real or perceived danger or risk in which the outcome, although uncertain, can be influenced by the actions of the participants” (Ewert & Sibthorp, 2014).

Because little of this OE framework intrinsically addresses equity, diverse worldviews or environmental justice, building a COE means undercutting or shifting some of the underlying wilderness values embedded in it. Critical pedagogy was an initial inspiration for this task. This body of theory and practice draws heavily from the writing of Paulo Friere (1970, 1973) who believed that educators should cultivate a ‘critical consciousness’ by teaching students to perceive the systems of oppression that operate in their lives. Through this consciousness, students become equipped and motivated to dismantle such systems. With regards to OE and environmental education, Gruenewald (2003) proposed a critical pedagogy of place whereby participants learn to critique colonial and other oppressive narratives of place (decolonization), like those inherent to the wilderness idea, and in doing so open opportunities for more just relationships with land (reinhabitation). Students of critical pedagogy of place learn to promote sustainability in their communities through actions that support the people, stories and worldviews marginalized by settler colonialism.

Critical pedagogy of place draws influence from ecojustice education. In defining ecojustice, Bowers (2001) posits that much environmentalism serves the interests of settler colonialism by restricting the environmental agency of marginalized communities. In this oppressive frame, poor people, urban folks or people of color are seen as causes of ecological degradation, and therefore the cultural autonomy of poor, urban, or racially oppressed communities is problematized. This situates the environmental values produced and maintained by indigenous nations, people of color, urban communities, and poor communities, as “low-status knowledge” (Bowers, 2001, p. 19). For this reason, American environmentalism is normed into a restrictive set of values that do not and cannot represent all the cultural environmental relationships across Earth. OE and environmental education are often used as

extensions of this knowledge-hierarchy to demean and erase important environmental worldviews of non-academic groups (McLean, 2013).

An ecojustice education shifts values from individualism to community, from progress to maintenance, from globalization to multiplicity, and from science to sciences. Interestingly, Bowers (2008) asks educators to avoid critical pedagogy of place because it revolves around a singular narrative of colonization and liberation while neglecting the varied and continuous histories of habitation. Decolonizing theory paints broad strokes about what must happen to create more just relationships with places, and in doing so “assumes that Western theorists possess the answers that the other cultures should live by” (Bowers, 2008, p. 325). In a place-based ecojustice education, students explore and advocate for the cultures, knowledge, and relationships with place that are disrupted by hegemonies specific to that place. Through this, students learn to invest time, energy, and wealth in their communities rather than in globalized capitalism.

More recently, the field of land education reworked, united, and reiterated many of the threads of critical pedagogy of place and ecojustice education. Land education is a place-based approach that privileges indigenous knowledge, agency and title, and offers reconceived relationships with place through anti-colonial critique. Tuck et al. (2014), founders of land education, seek:

to remind people to place Indigenous understandings of land and life at the center of environmental issues and other (educational) issues; provide an explicit critique and rendering of settler colonialism, treaties, and sovereignty; invite and inspire acts of refusal, reclamation, regeneration, and reimagination; and theorize pathways to living as separate sovereignties on shared territory. (p. 19)

In this way, land education does not ask populations to unite behind a place, but, through the deconstruction of colonial oppression, to make room for multiple communities to complexly engage with place.

Land education theorist Paperson (2014) conceived a “ghetto land pedagogy” by first positioning ghetto colonialism (a.k.a. gentrification) as a form of settler colonialism and western violence. Then, Paperson proposes a curriculum that teaches a “critique of settler environmentalism” (p. 115). Storied land, which is the spatial *and* temporal attention to place, emerges as a replacement for wilderness and other aspects of settler environmentalism. Teaching storied land means approaching Black, Latinx and Native resistance to settler colonialism as ongoing, even on land that has long been outside of tribal jurisdiction, such as that on which my outdoor program takes place.

### **My Critical Outdoor Education**

My attempt at COE draws from all of the influences here in addition to that of my own experiences, educators, and supervisors. Additionally, my COE design evolved throughout the data taking period and this journey of practice is considered data in itself. However, from the beginning, my overarching conceptualization of COE maintained a few constant developments:

- 1) *My program should attack the urban-wilderness dichotomy.* I moved the location of the central backpacking trip program from the Adirondack mountains to the Catskill mountains of New York, so that participants may travel, live and drink water in the environment that supplies New York City with some of the highest quality drinking water in the world. I taught details about the function of this watershed, including how the mountains precipitate moisture from the air, filter water, and cause water to flow towards the city. In doing this I hoped participants would begin to see their city and the Catskill wilderness as a continuous landscape.
- 2) *My program should teach indigenous narratives and narratives of land conflict.* I taught participants about the Lenni-Lenape as the people with historical title to both the Catskills and New York City (NYC), including their story of disintegration and the re-emergence of tribal government in the Midwest and Canada. I also asked participants to relate these stories to land grabs and environmental justice issues in their

neighborhoods, or to the use of eminent domain to remove poor communities in order to create the NYC reservoirs in the Catskills. Through these stories, I sought to counter the assumption of uninhabited wilderness, and teach environmental values as contested. In particular, I hoped to open consideration for the environmentalisms of poor urban communities that are considered “low-status knowledge” (Bowers, 2001, p. 19) by mainstream environmentalism.

- 3) *My program should validate all exploration of environmental relationships by participants, regardless of how well they align with my environmental values.* I

introduced semi-structured reflective journals through which I asked participants to relate to the Catskills, to react to their awareness of storied land, or to contrast their own relationship to nature with more mainstream perspectives. The prompts that I used to accomplish this evolved over the data period.

- 4) *Finally, my program should mandate reflexive practice.* I used several tools to hold myself accountable to reflexivity, many of which were part of the data collection process, especially detailed field notes. My goal in all of this reflexivity was to encounter my own racist and colonial assumptions and continue to bounce my practice off of the influences of COE. Therefore, throughout my work I reread and continued to interpret critical pedagogy of place, ecojustice education, and land education

### **Positionality**

I am a white man and a millennial. My ancestors are mostly Gaelic-Irish and all settled within Lenapehoking on Turtle Island (also known as the New York City metropolitan area) between 1870-1922. My own passion for the outdoors is undoubtedly connected to significant early positive experiences in natural settings, especially annual family vacations in the Adirondack Mountains and frequent exploratory trips to parks/refuges around Long Island. In these places my dominant memories are of feeling safe, cared for, empowered, liberated, and entertained. Most of the participants of my wilderness program share little to no characteristics

of this brief biography and may not have the same emotional reaction to the outdoors. However, there is at least one significant similarity between my participants and me- we are all embedded in an institutional structure and culture created by the Fiver Children's Foundation.

As the wilderness director for Fiver, I encountered a fundamental problem: the norms of OE did not seem to facilitate a sense of belonging between my participants, who are predominantly poor youth and youth of color, and the wild landscapes we inhabited. This quandary resulted in the wilderness education program examined here.

### **The Research Site**

The Fiver Children's Foundation is a non-profit youth development organization serving youth ages 8-18 living below the poverty line in New York City and Madison County, New York. Fiver is grounded in the principles of positive youth development (PYD), and like other PYD organizations, it has a strong model of progress and achievement that participants work through as they age. Fiver is deeply intentional, with a progressive theory of change revolving around three core outcomes for all participants: Civic Mindedness, Healthy and Ethical Life Choices, and Education and Career Success (Fiver Children's Foundation, 2013). In terms of implementation, Fiver offers year-round programming in diverse aspects of life including emotional wellness, ethics, college/career preparedness, public speaking, environmental education, and health. A cornerstone of Fiver programming is Camp Fiver, a rural sleep-away camp in Central New York, which all participants have the option to attend (free of charge) for two weeks every summer. The OE program studied here is called 'Wilderness' and operates out of this summer camp; all participants of a certain program stage (usually around 15-16 years old), are required to prepare for and attend a four-day outdoor backpacking trip in order to progress to the next program stage. While on the wilderness trip, participants work together to navigate between pre-determined camping areas among other significant sites including the summit of a mountain. Throughout this process, participants share responsibility for cooking

meals, setting up camp, and taking care of gear. My role is to teach participants backcountry skills for four days before the trip, then facilitate the trip for the following four days. Therefore, my OE program is just one of many programs working simultaneously to offer developmental experiences.

### **Methodology: Action Research as Self-study**

The overarching methodology for this dissertation is self-study, which is an applied research process employed to help educators better understand, confront challenges, reach goals, or answer questions about their practice. Self-study incorporates multiple methods and analyses. This study uses an individual action-research framework and discourse analysis. Elliott (1991) defines action research as “the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of the action within it” (p.6). Compared to evaluative studies that target outcomes, action research draws knowledge from the process of designing and enacting change. Individual action research is a reflective inquiry process whereby a researcher-practitioner can examine their work. In this study, I draw practical implications from the interaction of my participants, my pedagogy, my colleagues, and my reflections as I implement a theorized COE. The implications of action research are not necessarily generalizable in a positivist tradition (Cassell & Johnson, 2006) because education itself is not a system of inputs and outputs but a craft and social enterprise. The local knowledge that is produced from this analysis is presented in order to inspire thought among other interested educators, thereby informing practice, not dictating it.

The organization of this study is modeled after Walker-Floyd's (2014) personal action research cycle (Fig. 1.1). I began already immersed in practice but was troubled by a sense of disconnect between my didactic goals and participant response (analogous to “record experiences and classroom challenges” in Walker-Floyd's model). In my subjective judgement, attempts to promote backcountry recreation, discuss environmental protection, or romanticize wilderness travel did not inspire much conversation in this program. Therefore, I sought out the

new ideas and approaches outlined in the previous section and designed pedagogy through them. I gathered data in the form of 25 semi-structured participant pre- and post- interviews (appendix A), three interviews with staff who were involved in the program (appendix B), 31 participant semi-structured journals (where journal entries had specific prompts) (appendix C), and three group reflection sessions in which participants communally debriefed the trip with my supervisor and myself. All data types except the interviews were inherent to the program which minimized disruption from contrived research processes. Staff were considered critical friends or “colleagues who will provide support and listen, be a sounding board, a critic, an evaluator; whatever role is deemed necessary,” (McNiff et al., 1996 in Kroll, 2012, pp. 99-100), and therefore interviews with staff were conversational and evaluatory of my practice. Journal prompts and group reflection prompts evolved with my curriculum and are outlined across my results and discussion. In accordance with an assigned Syracuse University institutional review board, written consent was obtained from participants/guardians for interviews, reflection sessions and journals separately. Pseudonyms are used to reference all participants, and the list matching participants to pseudonyms was destroyed upon completion of this manuscript.

After reviewing and reflecting on this data through personal field notes, I documented challenges and searched for guidance from other scholars/educators. I then designed changes and began the cycle again. Data were collected over the course of one season of employment in which I ran this wilderness program with four different groups of youth. Therefore, I was able to complete the action research cycle (Fig 1.1) four times.

**Figure 1.1**  
*The Personal Action Research Cycle*



*Note.* Reprinted from “Individual action research: The PARJ and self-study” by Walker-Floyd, L.K., 2014, p. 101

### **Discourse Analysis**

I chose to perform a discourse analysis of all data types because of discourse’s ability to handle both divergent and shared knowledge co-created by my participants, my colleagues, and myself. Stuart Hall (1992) defines Foucault’s (1978) original conception of discourse as “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic, a particular historical moment” (Hall, 1992, p. 201). In the frame of this paper, discourses are the shared constructions that allow us to make meaning around any feeling, concept, identity, or object that we name. Discourse is highly influenced by language because this is a dominant, but not sole, means by which people name and organize the world. This discourse analysis targets the language used to navigate and understand my program.

What distinguishes discourse from other branches of linguistics or epistemology is that it points to what Stephanie Taylor (2013) calls social ‘aggregates of meaning’: “people do not necessarily learn by observing. Rather, what they see is largely determined by already existing, socially circulated knowledge” (p. 10). A person learns discourses as they are raised in diverse



cultural contexts and they use these discourses to make meaning around something so that it overlaps with the meaning made by others. This ultimately means that discourse is dynamic and a necessary part of the constant evolution of societies.

Framed discursively, the underlying theory of this study is that certain discourses define the outdoors and do so in a way that 1) privileges the bodies and history of European descendants (or white folks) on the American continent, and 2) prevents all of us, but especially my participants, from creating or re-learning discourses needed for sustainable societies. This rationale is grounded in the 'critical turn' of discourse theory, when researchers began to apply discourse analysis to characterize the function of social power structures (Locke, 2004). Therefore, the analysis performed here is adapted from this critical discourse analysis and posits that the aggregates of meaning that we create around the language of race, class, gender, etcetera, including that which is hidden or coded language (e.g. the use of the term 'urban youth' to refer to poor youth or youth of color), construct norms and worldviews whereby settler colonial oppression is validated. Critical discourse analysis is well situated to understand power dynamics over the course of an action research project (Montesano & Schuman, 2015) and provides insights into the interaction of my critical outdoor pedagogy with meaning-making processes.

In this study, each data type was first inductively coded for content with a unique set of codes. A second qualified coder individually coded samples of each data type using the content code lists to check the validity of the first analysis. Initial inter-coder reliability (measured as instances of matching coding/sum of matching and non-matching coding) was 85.7% for participant journals, 80.5% for pre-program interviews, 82.4% for post-program interviews, 89.1% for staff interviews, and 82.6% for group reflection sessions. All disagreements in codes were discussed until agreement was achieved. Then these codes were examined together and a list of discursive codes was created, reiterated and refined. Trends in discourse among

participants, my colleagues, and myself, are characterized and interpreted in the following sections.

### **Results: Pervasive concepts**

The following are discursive analyses of terms and concepts that appeared throughout the data. All three emerged through data taken before the wilderness program and were validated by data taken during or after the program. These concepts represent the larger expectations that participants, my co-workers, and I both bring to my program and use to navigate the entire event, some of which are problematic for my COE objectives.

#### **Bonding/Teamwork**

Although the terms 'bonding' and 'teamwork' were not used interchangeably in the data, they tended to convey some singular sentiments. First, it is clear that the bonding and teamwork discussed is that among the program participants (i.e. peers). The boundaries of this bonding were consistently defined through peer units like 'my cabin' or 'LEAD' (the participant's program stage in the organization). Second, out of the nineteen participants who brought up teamwork, bonding, or both in interviews, twelve discussed teamwork around tasks associated with the trip, especially cooking and hiking, as the mechanism by which bonds are formed in the program. In this reasoning bonding emerges from working as a team.

Interestingly, three of the participants brought up bonding with peers as an expectation before the trip but, when questioned after the trip, expressed that they did not anticipate to bond with their peers. Chris exemplifies this phenomenon:

*Pre-program interview:*

Chris: I feel like it'll be hard but it's gonna be a great bonding experience with my cabin and we should work together and it's going to be fun.

*Post-program interview:*

Tommy: Was the trip what you expected?

Chris: I thought it was gonna be like more...it was more about like, bonding with my cabin than I thought.

While better follow up questions may have provided insight into this seeming contradiction, there are three clear ways to interpret it: 1) that the bonding did not occur in the way Chris originally expected, 2) that Chris said that he expected bonding to occur but he did not believe it, or 3) that he chose to claim that the bonding was a surprise in order to fulfill a preconceived narrative, perhaps the one he thought I wanted to hear. In all three of these hypotheses, the participants came into the program knowing that there is a discursive association between peer bonding and the wilderness program.

### **Challenge**

Challenge manifested diversely in the data. Cooking, hanging bear bags, getting wet/avoiding rain, and heat were all named as important challenges, each by two or more participants. However, hiking and its accompanying hardships including physical pain, exhaustion, frustration, and group pace setting, were the most commonly discussed challenges (brought up in twelve pre-program interviews and fourteen post-program interviews). Four participants used hiking to describe all the movement from place to place that occurred throughout the trip. In eight pre-program interviews and eleven post-program interviews, participants specifically highlighted the ascent and descent of 'the mountain' as the definitive hiking moment. In fact, throughout the data types, many participants understand the program to revolve around the difficulty of hiking to the summit of a mountain. When asked about how to change the trip Caitlin told me to keep the mountain "because I feel like...that's the main point of the trip." Even the fact that all participants and staff referred to this entity as 'the mountain' instead of 'a mountain' suggests that this specific challenge is a defining characteristic of the program. In yet one more example, both my supervisor and I pondered whether the significance of the challenge was lost when I moved the mountain ascent to the first day of the trip and effectively decentralized its role: Leah: "I do like the concept of like overcoming a

challenge...and I don't know if they're losing it by doing it on the first day." In my field notes I wrote: "did I take the wilderness trip and turn it into a camping trip? Am I devaluing the wilderness component by decentering the mountain?" Here, my anxiety underpins the significance of the mountain challenge.

The data reveal two key rationales for these structured challenges. First, challenge is an extension of the peer bonding/teamwork logic: wilderness challenges necessitate teamwork, and teamwork begets bonding. Yet a more pervasive rationale in the data is that these challenges, especially ascending a mountain, teach participants that hard work is rewarding and/or will allow them to accomplish goals. Nine participants and all three staff mentioned self-confidence and an inclination towards self-reliance as intrinsic benefits emanating from this lesson. While the reward of mountain climbing was 'the view' for eight participants, a key aspect of this lesson is that it has application to non-wilderness contexts. In explaining this concept to the participants, the camp director stated:

That's always gonna happen where you see something and you're like I'm not sure I can do it, and right now you've climbed a mountain, you've survived in the woods, you need to remember that, right? Like for any of those moments- I don't know if I can get through college, I don't know if I can get into college, I don't know if I can get that job...

This logic was reiterated by seven participants like Brandon who stated "now that I did it [the trip], I know I could do anything."

However, just like the three participants who stated that they expected to peer-bond but were then surprised when peer-bonding occurred, five participants who expected the trip to be challenging in pre-trip interviews claimed that they did not expect it to be challenging in post-trip interviews. Andy provides an example:

*Pre-program interview*

Andy: we're going to go through a lot of obstacles, a lot of hardships throughout the wilderness trip

### *Post-program interview*

Andy: I thought it was going to be easy, I thought it was going to be exciting but once I got there it was hard.

Later Andy provides clarity to this statement:

### *Post-program interview*

Andy: I expected to get tired but then not to the level where I was tired. I was really tired. This surprise at the degree of difficulty is echoed by four other participants. Therefore, while participants can articulate the role of challenge in the program both before and after the experience, completing the trip forces a different and perhaps more intimate way of knowing these challenges.

## **Comfort Zone**

Before, during, or after the trip, eleven participants and two staff mentioned the metaphor of 'stepping out of your comfort zone' as important context for the wilderness program. In all these cases, one's comfort zone refers to one's 'typical' activity or 'everyday life' and leaving one's comfort zone means enduring the discomfort created by something unfamiliar.

When interrogated, comfort zones tended not to be defined as experiences, but as categories of landscape that included 'the city' and 'urban' environments (mentioned in nine pre- and post-program interviews), while locations external to comfort zones included 'wilderness,' 'the woods,' and 'nature' (mentioned in nine pre-program and seven post-program interviews). In fact, when asked to distinguish wilderness from non-wilderness, three participants described it as a place 'outside of your comfort zone,' while several others contrasted it against the city. In this way, comfort zones actually define the boundaries of wilderness. Finally, technology, especially smartphones and transportation, was also frequently implicated as an aspect of the urban environment that one should leave behind when stepping out of one's comfort zone (mentioned in eleven pre-program and nine post-program interviews).

For some participants, there is intrinsic value in leaving one's comfort zones. Roman said that you need to be uncomfortable sometimes "in order to truly enjoy life." Likewise, eight others specifically targeted the city, explaining that 'the city' is limited in its capacity to deliver experiences. For example, the ability to see stars and satellites was brought up in five post-program interviews as a benefit of leaving one's comfort zone.

Six participants and two staff thought that stepping outside of one's comfort zone also teaches the ability to adapt to new situations. Similarly, the camp director believes that the wilderness trip serves as a source of pride for participants because it allows them to own an experience that is "atypical" and "special" among their home communities. Finally, distance from technology was perceived as positive in ten pre-program and nine post-program interviews because it relieves the distractions that prevent interaction with others, and therefore is another driver of bonding and teamwork. In all these justifications, the city, urban, or suburban environment is situated as lacking in its ability to provide benefits that only wilderness can.

### **Genealogy of Pervasive Discourse**

These three pervasive concepts (bonding/teamwork, challenge, and comfort zone) are considered part of the dominant discourse structuring this wilderness program because they clearly helped participants conceptualize the experience prior to their participation, and are used to make sense of the experience during and afterwards. As stated previously, discourse is the thing that allows us to name and make meaning about anything. Under this premise, bonding/teamwork, challenge, and comfort zones provide a system of values through which to conceptualize the program. My analysis finds two highly interactive sources of the dominant discourse in my program: the organizational culture of the Fiver Children's foundation, and the broader discourse around the American outdoors and outdoor adventure education.

### ***The Wilderness Program in Organizational Culture***

Six participants specifically named conversations with older campers and staff as sources of awareness of bonding/teamwork and challenge. Caitlin states: "when you hear

wilderness trip, and everybody's talking about it, you hear climbing up mountains, and doing all that vigorous stuff." In this quote, one can perceive how conceptualizations are passed down across age groups and from staff to participants. This lends authority to these discourses as younger participants are learning how to rationalize the wilderness program.

Yet even more powerful than this is the way that the wilderness trip is defined as a 'rite of passage' within the culture of the organization, and how bonding/teamwork, challenge, and comfort zone create expectations or a narrative for this rite. The camp director defines 'rite of passage' as something that must be completed in order to signify certain kinds of development. She names three key aspects that have "shifted" the wilderness program towards a rite of passage over her time of employment: 1) younger participants witnessing participants returning from the trip with new bonds and stories, 2) the organization's decision to require completion of the wilderness program in order to graduate from the entire organization program, and 3) the organization's decision to require participants to go on the trip only once instead of twice.

This 'rite of passage' helps explain the silence that participants demonstrated around questions of program design. For instance, during post-interviews, I asked 'what were the most important parts of the trip?,' hoping to understand which of my pedagogical decisions were most impactful. Instead, nine out of twelve participants who were asked this provided answers to the question 'what was most important for you or your group to make it through this experience?' Although this repeated misinterpretation eventually led me to change the wording of this interview question, the inclination to interpret it as an inquiry about teamwork or overcoming challenges rather than one about my program design underscores an instinct not to question the experience. In a rite of passage, one is tasked with such rites because that is what others have done before, and the maintenance of the organizational culture relies on its completion. In this way, the Fiver rite of passage discourse establishes a particular power dynamic where the participants are expected to be subject to the will of both staff and the wilderness. This interaction of power and expectation is exemplified by two participants from a group who

refused to hike a portion of the program during my early years as wilderness director. Both decided to redo the trip the following year because they were left with a sense of incompleteness at having not met all expectations the first time around.

Justification for this rite exists in its transformational abilities. As the camp director told one group of participants:

Almost always the group that left and the group that comes back look a little different.

Just in the way you carry yourself, in the way you talk to one another, um I think your pride, your confidence, all of that has definitely changed.

Here we see the impacts of bonding/teamwork, challenge, and stepping out of one's comfort zone united into a singular transformative experience.

Therefore, rite of passage within Fiver's culture is important in establishing and maintaining the expectations of bonding/teamwork, challenge, and comfort zone. However, to further understand why these expectations create such a strong narrative of this wilderness program, we can look towards analyses of American wilderness discourse and the field of OE.

### ***Broader Wilderness Discourse and Fiver's Program***

Wilderness discourse is entangled with modern fears that humans, especially youth, are increasingly victims of physical conveniences and are provided few opportunities to build self-confidence. Outdoor adventure education asserts itself as a healthy alternative to these qualities and does so by implicating bonding/teamwork, challenge, and comfort zone. For example, NOLS states: "Living in these conditions, away from the distractions of modern civilization fosters self-reliance, judgment, respect, and a sense of responsibility for our actions" (p.240, 2017). Here 'modern civilization' functions similarly to 'comfort zone,' particularly in its ability to remove distraction. In fact, comfort zones are well represented in outdoor education literature (for examples see: Exeter, 2001; Prouty et al., 2007) where they are "premised on the belief that, when placed in a stressful situation, learners will respond to the challenge, overcome their hesitancy...and grow as individuals" (Wattchow & Brown, 2011, p. 41), which echoes the



association between stepping out of comfort zones and personal growth found in my data. Similarly, Outward Bound (2020) shares a conception of the role of challenge with my wilderness participants and staff: “through shared challenges, adversity, failure and success, students discover and develop new skills, confidence and passion” (para. 2). Outward Bound then explains the importance of teamwork: “The idea that ‘you are needed,’ no matter who you are, is a critical ingredient to the success of Outward Bound programs” (para. 3). Finally, bonding appears frequently in OE, especially Turner’s (1969) notion of *communitas*, in which community members experience a state of equality and solidarity through co-experiencing a liminal event (Ashworth, 2017). In this way, the pervasive discourses that create meaning in my program are representative of a much broader cultural discourse around the outdoors that my participants and the staff encounter, likely in diverse social realms.

Likewise, the transformative nature of ‘rites of passage’ through OE is not specific to the Fiver Children’s Foundation (for examples, see: Beames, 2004; Bell, 2003; Lertzman, 2002; Norris, 2011). ‘Rites of passage’ in OE literature frequently refers to the anthropological model proposed by Van Gennep (1909/1960), which outlines a process whereby community members reinvent their social roles via some liminal event that triggers new self-conceptions. This theory has striking resemblance to the one described in my data, particularly with regards to challenge, which is an important component of the OE liminal stage (Neill, 2001).

In this way, the changes made by my COE approach do not seem to interfere with the ‘business as usual’ of outdoor adventure education. Later, when I discuss the interaction of the pervasive and counter discourses, I will problematize teamwork/bonding, challenge, and comfort zone, and discuss how these impact my critical approach.

### **Results: Counter-Narratives**

In addition to pervasive concepts rooted in broader outdoor discourse, the data show evidence of discursive shifts. The term ‘counter-narrative’ is borrowed from critical race theory to describe explanations of phenomena that are created in resistance to dominant paradigms

(Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). I use this term to define shared discursive transformations occurring over the course of my programs. Counter-narratives were created as participants and staff interacted with my pedagogy and subsequently, I began to more intentionally include them in my curriculum, which gave participants more opportunities to refine and reflect on such discourses.

### **From Nature to Storied Land**

Overall conversations about wilderness, including those directed by me, shifted towards conversations about the Catskill wilderness specifically. In this way, participants were discussing two different things before and after the program, moving from a more generalized to a more place-based discussion of wilderness.

Prior to or early on in the experience, participants were asked in both a lesson and interviews to define wilderness and describe their expectations for what the wilderness “would be like.” By far the most common answers (eighteen pre-program interviews) named more abundant communities of wildlife and plants, especially trees, which indicate a more “real” or “authentic” nature. In eight of these responses, participants automatically contrasted these ecological assemblages with the lack of ecological diversity found in the city. In this way, wilderness was defined by possessing what the city lacks. Secondly, except for activities associated with outdoor recreation, human activity was considered minimal or absent in wilderness in thirteen pre-program interviews. At the farthest end of this spectrum were three participants who described wilderness as a place where nature can be its “true self” without “being controlled by people.”

This perception of wilderness runs counter to a significant theme emerging during and after the program in which humans are important characters in narratives of place. This is unsurprising considering the extent to which I taught and facilitated discussion on the human stories of the Catskills.

The two most common stories to be discussed in participant's post-program conceptions of place were those of the Lenni-Lanape (the people indigenous to NYC and the Catskills, also known as the Delaware) (mentioned in sixteen post-program interviews) and the Catskill communities flooded in the construction of the NYC reservoirs (mentioned in nine post-program interviews). Three participants even named this knowledge using the rhetoric of counter-narrative. For example, in describing what he learned from the program, Andy stated:

That everything has a story behind it. Because I just looked at the mountain as a source of water but now I view it as the Lenape's territory, and how many people saw the mountains as their home, and now we just view it as a camping area.

Here, Andy contrasts common ways of looking at the Catskill mountains, namely as a recreational site and a source of resources, with his newfound knowledge of the place as someone's territory and home.

This shift in understanding was accompanied by some misconceptions that, while not pervading, beg questions about how my curriculum facilitated such errors. First, two participants seemed to assume that the way we lived during the wilderness program was similar to Lenni-Lenape lifeways. Chris describes the experience of getting to "do what the Lenape did." This statement seems to be ignorant of and downplays the sophistication of indigenous infrastructure and resource management. Yet a more common participant misconception (six participants) was the assumption that the ecology experienced during their trip is the direct product of indigenous management. In a letter to the Delaware Nation of Oklahoma, Caitlin wrote: "seeing what you have created and how it has flourished is amazing." The history of settler-agriculture and logging, which resulted in almost every acre of Catskill lowlands being deforested at some point in the last 250 years is absent from Caitlin's understanding of the landscape despite the fact that this information is included, but not stressed, in the curriculum. Still, this assumption represents a significant departure from the assumption that wilderness is a de-peopled landscape where nature can flourish without human impact. Furthermore, these may only be

partial misconceptions- thousands of years of indigenous management could certainly have impacts on soil, microbe, seedbed and fungal assemblages that persist in the present.

Many participants had difficulty explaining the benefit of knowing the Catskills as a landscape of indigenous and other human stories. When probed, four participants explained that these stories give a better sense of their water supply. Caitlin states that there is a link between “the people on the land and what I’m consuming in my body.” However, eight of the participants stated that knowing these stories is a way of ‘honoring’ or ‘respecting’ the people and the place. This sense of respect or honor was always part of some sentiment about the injustice of people losing access to meaningful land, which is the second major counter-narrative emerging from the data.

### **From Neutral to Injustice**

Injustice is a significant concept in my approach to COE and it is unsurprising that it emerged as participants storied their perception of the landscape. However, participants approached this injustice in diverse ways.

When injustice appears in the data, it is most often used to describe the loss of indigenous land title and the loss of community through the construction of the NYC reservoirs. The entity responsible for committing these injustices differed between these two stories. The nine participants who mentioned the reservoirs seemed to struggle to specifically name the ‘who’ that forced communities to leave the land marked for reservoir construction. In their journals and post-program interviews, six participants described a third person perpetrator using words like ‘they’ or ‘their’ while three implicated themselves, as residents of NYC, using the propositions ‘us’ and ‘we.’ However, when discussing the loss of Lenape power, eleven of the sixteen participants who mentioned indigeneity named ‘white people’ as the aggressors. One participant even warned the Lenape about white people in their letter to the Delaware Nation.

Four participants made connections between different instances of injustice. In describing her perception of the Catskill region, Ashley named both indigenous and poor settler

communities, stating: “There’s been a lot of movement of different people but not a lot of sympathy for the people affected by those changes.” Ashley unites the loss of indigenous land with the loss of poor mountain communities through a socio-cultural indifference towards the act of moving people.

While setting up one of the journal prompts, I asked participants to “think about your own people to help understand your relationship to any peoples who have lost power in the Catskills.” In response, seven participants described connections to their own stories. Caitlin wrote that she “knows what it feels like to be kicked out of a home or a place because of wealth or diversity.” This comment is a reference to gentrification in her neighborhood, which came up as a topic in the discussion immediately before she wrote this. Three participants named parts of their ancestry that are indigenous to the Americas. Miguel explained how the Spanish greatly reduced the population of his ancestors in Armenia, Columbia and then wrote: “I also want to share my solidarity from my Cuyabro blood to your Lenape blood.”

In their journals, six participants specifically used either or both injustices to grapple with their own sense of disconnection to wild places or nature in general because of their race. In a letter to the Delaware Nation, Chris wrote

Nature in general is bizarre. Most of it is quite unknown to me. The reason it is unknown to me however is known to both of us. People have claimed ‘nature’ as their own and restricted or pressured others not to come. I may not be the most interested in nature but everyone should have the chance to experience it themselves without judgement.

Similarly, George explained that “there aren’t many colored people like us and for many unwealthy, this place has remained undiscovered.” Likewise, Ashley specifically identifies “the power of white people” as the reason that other races “think that their connection to native land from places like NYC does not exist” and that this has prevented her own community from acknowledging “nature and all that it does for us.” In these examples and others, participants

explain their ignorance, disconnection, or disinterest in nature as a product of racially motivated restrictions.

Five participants described injustice towards the Catskill region itself. These expressions explained that either the rapid pace of change in human use of the mountains or the loss of “your people” (referring to the Lenape) unjustly harmed the region.

In making meaning of injustices towards the Lenape, the poor settler communities, or the Catskill region, ten participant journals expressed apology or sentiments of guilt. In seven of these instances, the apology was sympathetic in nature, with participants communicating that they were upset that these events took place. Yet three participants implicated themselves in such apologies. In a letter to the mountains, Antonio wrote “we are really sorry how we have treated your land and what we made it into.” In this same letter, Antonio acknowledged the ways he benefits from the reservoirs and it is this benefit that caused some participants to see themselves as complicit in injustice. Yet in resolving issues of injustice, almost all participants (fourteen) included some expression of gratitude, which is the third counter-narrative of my analysis.

### **From “Peace of Mind” to Gratitude**

Prior to and early on in the program, participants expressed several positive associations with nature. When asked about their favorite things to do in nature, typical answers included some kind of appreciation through a sensory experience especially looking at the sky, feeling grass under their bodies, listening to quiet, watching animals, and other activities that might be associated with mindfulness. In pre-program interviews, fourteen participants explained that these experiences created calming and peaceful emotions. Ten of these participants attributed these effects to the aesthetic “beauty” of nature whereby natural entities are intrinsically pleasing to perceive. Furthermore, five participants described these experiences as breaks from the loudness or ugliness of the city.

While much of the language used to describe this calming effect of nature persisted throughout the trip, it became framed in gratitude. One common expression of gratitude (thirteen participant journals) was directed towards the Lenni Lenape people. In eleven of these journals, the justification for this thanks-giving was linked to an explanation about how the current provisional landscape is the product of Lenape land management. In his letter to the Delaware nation, Antonio writes “your mountains are beautiful. They provide us with so much resources, most important our water. So thank you for the beautiful land you’ve made for us.”

Yet, the clearest trend of gratitude (sixteen participant journals and comments made during two group reflection sessions) was directed towards the Catskill mountains themselves. In their journals, thirteen participants believed that the mountains deserved gratitude because they provide clean moving water for NYC residents. Often, these statements included a description of what they learned about hydrology. For example, in a letter to the Catskill region, Charles wrote: “Thank you mountains for supplying us with great water. When it rains the water goes in the mountain and it helps purify our water.” In three journals, this gratitude followed a statement of apology and empathy for what has happened to them. Here is the full quote from Antonio’s journal mentioned in my discussion of injustice:

We are really sorry how we have treated your land and what we made it into. But I’m also really thankful for what you have provided us. The water and rivers from your mountains have helped us in many strong ways- survival is the main way.

While Antonio’s guilt may not be resolved by gratitude, acknowledgement of the provisioning landscape is an important addition to how he processes this guilt. In this way, gratitude may serve as a means by which participants try to heal their relationship to both indigenous peoples and nature.

### **Interpreting the Interaction of Pervasive and Counter Discourse**

In deciding how to interpret these two types of discourse (i.e. pervasive and counter), I first turned towards the fundamental principles of action research. In Kurt Lewin’s (1951) early

model, researchers look at phenomenon through ‘force field analysis’ which identifies forces that inhibit and support the desired change. Because the goal of my project was to interrupt racist and hegemonic perceptions of the environment, the discourses that were pervasive to both my trip and the field fit nicely into Lewin’s category of inhibitory forces while counter narratives may be treated as supporting forces. While the following section describes important knowledge garnered from force-field analysis, it will be promptly critiqued for the position of power that it places me in.

### **Critical Pedagogy: Teaching Against the Pervasive**

All of the shifts named in the ‘counter-narratives’ section can be linked to a transformation in my pedagogical stance; as I obtained more nuanced information about how rigidly my participants and co-workers constructed pervasive discourse around the wilderness experience, I more directly targeted these discourses in my instruction and design. Throughout my field notes I describe an ever-increasing desire to be “more explicit” about the concepts that I wanted the participants to critique (including challenge, teamwork, and comfort zone), as well as a decreasing sense that my participants had to “come to their own conclusions.” For instance, a summative journal prompt that I added towards the end of the data-taking period asked participants to complete the following statement: “To many people the Catskills are a place to hike. To me the Catskills are...” Here, I require participants to come up with a narrative of place that resists a dominant one. While this prompt has significant room for diverse narratives, the trajectory of participant writing permits no room to debate the need for a counter-narrative. By progressive standards of environmental education, this approach may be problematic; it straddles the line between teaching participants how to think and what to think, the latter of which is often considered demeaning and problematic (Project Learning Tree, 2019, para. 1).

However, these changes in my approach occurred as the pervasive discourses revealed themselves to be troublesome for my critical aims. The clearest example of this occurred



halfway through the summer when both my supervisor and I were concerned about the decrease in participant enamoration with hiking the mountain. I began to feel insecure about my critical approach to the program, and was distraught by the possibility that, through the reduction of challenge, I had removed opportunities for teamwork and the leaving of comfort zones. Therefore, I planned a trip that was more rigorous than the ones prior. The result was frustrating; my participants were too tired to think critically about the landscape and whatever sense of accomplishment I perceived in my participants was overshadowed by my sense that we had “used the land” for an extractive purpose. Michelle, a participant on this particular trip, captured this sentiment in my post-interview with her:

I’m not saying throw the whole hiking away, it just wasn’t much fun at the end of it because we were just exhausted and we just wanted to get to the lean-to and we just didn’t want to do anything else... Maybe do different like, activities instead of hiking so we can still do our journal entries. After the trip you’re gonna be like oh I was tired and maybe you’ll still be like oh yeah it was still a good experience but like... you wanna have a good time and like...you know... be appreciative of the woods.

For both Michelle and myself, our ability to consider relationship with the environment was restrained by challenge.

Likewise, over the course of the data-taking period the discourse of comfort zone was often antithetical to relationships with the Catskill region. In my field notes I write: “how can I allow participants to feel out of their comfort zones when I am actively trying to connect this place to their comfort zones- bash the division between these two zones?” This contradiction is further exposed through participant’s use of ‘the city’ to define their comfort zone and the wilderness to describe something that is external to their comfort zones. This point becomes increasingly pertinent considering how frequently the city was discoursed as lacking in healthful opportunities and generally not as pure as the wilderness. Scholars of the wilderness debate have critiqued this contempt of the urban, arguing that obsession with pristine wilderness is

intentionally positioned to continue the degradation of developed environments, often with racist and classist impacts (Cronon, 1996; Deluca & Demo, 2008). In this way, the discourse of comfort zone asked participants to perceive their experience as novel, pure, and episodic, whereas I asked them to know the Catskill wilderness as relevant to their daily lives.

Finally, promoting the three pervasive discourses is dangerous because it may teach participants to remain silent and uncritical of a potentially harmful experience. For example, during one trip, our entire group was made to feel extremely uncomfortable by a white man who persistently stared at us in a public camping area. In a later discussion, participants implicated their race as a cause of this interaction, and used terms like “we don’t belong here” and “different” to explain how this interaction made them feel. Purity states: “they was really staring us down like whole body like we different to them....it was white people staring at us Black folks.” Certainly, this experience challenged participants and asked them to step outside of their comfort zones, but for a reason that attacks identity. While we might be able to distinguish between positive and negative types of risk (+R+ vs -R; Curtis, 2015), moments like this are not isolated and indicate a broader understanding of the outdoors as white space. Race is implicated in every activity I plan in the backcountry yet the discourses of challenge, comfort zone and bonding/teamwork, particularly as they construct a rite of passage, ask participants not to question outdoor experiences. My participant’s feelings of marginalization would have been ignored had I not stepped out of the rite of passage framework. Unsurprisingly, the participants and I turned to the counter-narratives, especially injustice to help us deal with moments like these. In explaining her reaction, Kendra states “he really made me feel like he don’t want me here and I got angry because that’s wrong. I should be allowed here.”

It was such frequent negative encounters that made me aware of the hypocrisy of permitting the pervasive discourses to go unquestioned while trying to encourage counter-narrative. Therefore, it became clear that I couldn’t encourage the production of new narratives without being able to name and describe dominant perspectives. Alternatively, the counter

narratives offer important resistance to the pervasive discourse: storied land allows participants to engage with place instead of centering the bonding/teamwork among groups members; gratitude asks participants to perceive the biophysical importance of the Catskills to human communities rather than treating the mountains as a challenge to conquer; and participants engaging in justice use their voice and speak against oppression rather than accept the silence that 'rite of passage' demands.

The characterization of a discourse as 'counter' also fundamentally changes how one teaches and engages with that discourse. It is when I asked questions that explicitly challenged the pervasive narratives like "why don't we tell the story of violence against the Lenape in the Catskill wilderness?," or "why are we the only mixed race group of people out in the woods?" or even "why were you never taught about where your water comes from?" that the discourses of storied land, injustice, and gratitude truly started to emerge. In this way, the counter narratives draw strength from their resistive character.

Thus, the counter-narrative shifts may have emerged as a response to the ways I was critiquing teamwork/bonding, challenge, and comfort zone and favoring perspectives that challenged dominant and common ways of thinking about the Catskills. My inclination to see discourse oriented in a tension between the dominant and the pervasive in my practice is supported by many interpretations of critical pedagogy. In this framing, teaching counter-narratives is part of raising critical consciousness, which gives participants the language and discourse to name oppression. For instance, on several trips I encouraged participants to relate their or their ancestor's experiences with land theft to the European colonization of Lenni-Lenape land. Through this, I sought to teach participants to perceive the function of oppression in their lives.

Still, this interpretation is simplistic. Despite my frustration with the pervasive discourses, neither the participants nor I fully abandoned them. The counter-narrative shifts seem to be the result of a less one-dimensional interaction with the pervasive discourses. In particular, my

participants were able to express both pervasive and counter-narratives in their post-program interviews. Like Finney (2014) who problematizes “the impulse to automatically consign any African American environmental experience to the field of environmental justice” (p. 109), I must critique the way my particular interpretation of injustice and oppression minimize other participant interactions with place. Thus, the final inquiry of this study asks whether and in what ways outdoor educators can both challenge dominant perceptions of the outdoors and keep those foundational values of OE which continue to result in important learning experiences.

### **Synergy of Dominant and Counter Discourse**

My aspiration to raise participant critical consciousness, while an important concept, is limited and ultimately exposes my lack of attention to the critiques of critical pedagogy iterated in the framing of this manuscript. As stated earlier, for Bowers (2008), critical pedagogy ignores the nuance provided by place-based education. Instead of deconstructing the narratives that equate geographies, critical pedagogues tend to treat European colonization as a singular project whereby teaching decolonization in one place is analogous to teaching it in another. This can be demeaning to place, local ecology, and indigenous cultures, which tend to be extremely place-based. In my program, obsession with replacing dominant narratives with counter narratives reduces the agency of my participants to build complex relationships with place. All of my participants are both oppressed by and complicit in the discourses that justify racism, erase indigenous peoples, and degrade the environment. Therefore, my program should contain opportunities to explore their relationship to such complexity.

In truth, my data show evidence of this complexity. The following sections explore how my participants and I did and can approach the interaction of these two types of discourse in a more complex and interactive way.

### ***“Can we do both?”***

The title of this section quotes a significant conversation that I had with my supervisor, pseudonym Leah. At the end of the summer, we discussed how much we had both grown from

grappling with COE and what this might mean for the future of the program. We both acknowledged that the critical products of the program were beneficial and in line with the organization's theory of change. However, we could not as easily relegate pervasive discourses to the category of 'oppressive.' The dialogue ended with an unresolved inquiry into whether or not counter-narratives of cultural conflict, the frame of injustice, and connection to place through gratitude could be taught alongside the pervasive discourses that are representative of the larger field of OE.

Tommy: So I feel like I was juggling two pieces which is 1) the connection to the place and 2) the feeling like you accomplished something, right? With your group and with your team, um...and I realized that I kind of put those at odds with each other sometimes.

Leah: right and maybe we don't need to. Like can we do both?

In the conversation that followed Leah was instrumental in exposing several under-thought aspects of my pedagogy. Leah helped me realize that I do value both types of discourse in the program; both evoked powerful thoughts, words and actions from participants despite the problems with the pervasive discourse.

Leah and I used the word "balance" several times to describe our desired synergy of these pervasive and counter discourse. Yet what is most clear is that the data resist the characterization of the relationship between these two in simple and digestible terms. In explaining the function of power among discourses, Foucault (1978) states:

We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies... We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.... There is not, on the

one side, a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it.  
(pp.100-101).

A small but significant branch of OE theory and research embraces complexity in a way that echoes Foucault's interpretation of discourse. Noel Gough (2009) borrows Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) philosophical conception of the rhizome, which has no hierarchical organization and no specific center, beginning, end, or singular merge point, to describe the function of knowledge in both outdoor educational inquiry. Rhizomatic analyses look for harmony, conflict, synergy, commensalism, and parasitism among elements of an educational experience, and do so in a way that sparks curiosity and curriculum 'play' (Gough, 2009). Subsequently, rhizomatic pedagogy is concerned with the "un-naming" rather than the naming of dominant and counter discourse. In this spirit, I will delineate thoughts on how pervasive and counter discourse might together produce something complex and rhizomatic and can be used to inform the practice of COE. This does not mean that I advocate replacing critical consciousness with rhizomatous approaches in my program; rather, my analysis extends Leah's notion of doing "both" from teaching counter *and* pervasive discourse towards teaching critically *and* rhizomatically.

### ***"Learning From Rather than Overcoming the Mountain"***

The title of this section proved to be an important expression in communicating the kinds of changes I wanted to implement in the wilderness program. 'Learning from the mountain' signifies a shift from the pervasive conception of challenge to one in which the landscape is considered an active player in helping participants achieve goals. In this perspective, challenge becomes a gift. Roman writes:

Dear Catskills, I honestly think that you are beautiful because no matter how tough you get, there's always a reward for us in the end and the journey you make us take teaches us that it's always worth it in the long run.

There are certainly grounds to critique this notion of challenge as a gift, particularly because it may portray the mountains as all-knowing rather than as something with which we are in relationship. However, this perspective also has significant potential to intertwine with the counter-narrative of gratitude because the very thing that constitutes challenge (i.e. the topography of the Catskills) is what squeezes moisture out of the air and allows water to flow and be filtered by soil layers. Challenge and provisioning emerge from the same quality of the Catskill region.

The mountain's ability to teach *and* provide in a synergistic way is reflective of a novel framing for my practice; one in which my curricular approach lends personhood to ecological entities. For example, over the course of the program I began talking about the mountains as elders because this is a social role that both presents challenges and rewards with greater knowledge:

Tommy to participants: the mountains are way older than us and have done a lot to make this place what it is. You might not always get along with them just like you don't always have the best relationship with old people in your life but they can still teach and care for you.

From the mountains, participants earn the right to stories of place or the ability to perceive the injustice embedded therein. My experimentation with personhood is rhizomatic because it stems from a sense of multiplicity in participant relationships to all the things that make place, and this has significant impact on the framing of pervasive and counter discourses. As I processed this approach with my supervisor, I began to verbally delineate it for the first time:

Like um, coming closer to the place- putting that on the same level as coming closer to each other, right? Like those are not two separate things, those are all happening in the same place in the same time. Which is..um..yeah which is certainly not how I tend to think about nature.

The following section describes the potential of bringing the ecological environment into the social environment and in doing so expand the rhizomatous function of COE.

### ***The Natural Environment as the Social Environment***

Over the course of the summer, Leah noticed a shift away from a participant centered approach: “Whatever happened to them used to be the center point and now it’s a little more about...the historical and environmental perspective.” I also perceived these changes but, because of my tendency to position the counter narratives opposite the pervasive discourses, consistently put the participant’s social experience at odds with their relationships to place. During the second trip of the summer I wrote: “A dominant theme still has something to do with how the learning about each other (social) is separated from the land.” In my perception, the participants and I were either interacting with each other or with place, but rarely did both simultaneously. In many ways, ‘the social’ correlates to the pervasive discourses, which centered the stories of the participants as they navigated the experience together. Conversely, the counter narratives excluded the events that participants were actively engaged in and instead centered the broader narratives of place (indigenous and otherwise), conflict/injustice over land title, and gratitude for what the Catskills provide in general. In this way, both place and the group dynamic, and therefore, both types of discourse excluded the other and left me with a sense of lacking.

However, the data do not necessarily support such a social-ecological dichotomy. For instance, in defining counter narratives, participants often referenced things happening around them such as Chris making meaning out of “seeing what the Lenape saw,” or Kendra using injustice to explain feeling marginalized by a white man in the wilderness. Discursively, it is an oversimplification to claim that expressions of storied land, injustice or gratitude were indifferent to participant activity, or that perceptions of bonding, challenge, and comfort zone did not impact how participants related to place. At the very least, discourses that conflict with each other also construct each other through that conflict.



If we consider the counter-narratives through this lens- that is, not as a contrast of pervasive discourse but as a product of approaching the pervasive discourse more complexly (rhizomatically)- then breaking through conflict between the two types of discourse may mean designing pedagogy in which place becomes part of social interaction and social interaction becomes an environmental relationship. In this framing, historical peoples, the land, and ecological entities are considered players in the program. These characters of place are subjects in the bonding experience, leaving one's comfort zone means encountering relatives from which one has been estranged (e.g. the Lenape, the communities removed for the reservoirs, provisioning ecological entities, etc.), and challenge becomes a source of strength for communally resisting racism and other hegemonic discourses that mediate relationship with land. Likewise, the participants are framed as members of the ecological community both on the trip and in their daily lives. A rite of passage grounded in developing such relationships would not be able to approach the land as a thing to overcome but instead as a person or people to meet.

In fact, such design did evolve in the design of my journal prompts. Supported by research on participant journaling in OE contexts, (Hutson et al., 2012), I designed more and more journal tasks that asked participants to enter into conversation with the people and entities that were initially excluded from the social environment. For example, by the end of the data collection period, I was asking participants to write letters to the Catskills and the extant Lenape governments, to identify with ecological entities in the Catskills, and to describe the personality of whichever mountain they climbed. I slowly started expanding the boundaries of personhood for myself and in doing so, both the participants and I were forced to think about how the Lenape, the environment, or the mountain related to us. Unsurprisingly, it is in the journals, much more so than in interviews or reflections sessions, where the data reveal the most significant evidence of the counter-narratives; there is a correlation between asking participants

to interact with the entities inherent to place and storying the landscape, naming injustice, and expressing gratitude.

An extremely powerful effect of this approach, and one that may combat the hegemony embedded in critical pedagogy, is that teaching the mountains as elders or any other ecological entity as a person decentralizes myself as the gatekeeper of critical consciousness; entities of place are my co-teachers or teacher-mentors, and these co-workers may have some goals, feelings, and ideas that are distinct from my own. Whereas critical pedagogy may position human teachers as more conscious and oppositional of the oppression experienced by participants, in a social-ecological COE, educators are expected to be as embedded in the social dynamic of place as the participants. My relationships with diverse aspects of place, with which I have my own conflicts, misunderstandings, and synergies (to be examined more deeply in chapter two) move me from teaching about place, to teaching with the entities of place. In this way, the evidence of my relationship with land is not in the experiences I have undertaken, but in the communications I have with entities of place. Importantly, rather than mediating participant relationships to nature, I become just one educator in a world of pedagogues. In this way, a social-ecological COE expects participants to have their own culturally-informed relationship with place-based entities, in which I may or may not be included.

This approach also forces me to reach out to elements of place. This may mean spending a significant amount of time in that place, participating in social and environmental justice work in support of that place, and reaching out to local communities, local elders, tribal governments, indigenous nations or native youth development organizations to build partnerships, which often takes decades to do well. For my program, this would also mean working on a deep relationship with New York City and its connection to the Catskills. Ultimately, a social-ecological framing of COE forces me to acknowledge and respect the co-workers who many of us educators hide or ignore.

Finally, in a social-ecological approach to place-based COE, ‘critical’ resistance to colonialism, racism or other oppression embedded in OE is not necessarily found in teaching the ability to name such hegemony, but in de-objectifying the entities of place. Providing opportunities for participants to converse with place, including the indigenous folks, the ecological entities, and the mountains themselves, allows me to enter and retreat on participant relationships with place. Determining when to step in and when to step back on these relationships becomes central to the work of place-based and outdoor educators, much like it would be if I was navigating a relationship with a human co-teacher.

While I may not yet have many examples to characterize a social-ecological COE, imagining its function inspires a deep creativity and stirs my passion, which is a strong indication that I am approaching the curricular play of rhizomatic pedagogy. In some powerful words Leah captures this potential for philosophical change with long term impacts on participant values:

I want to better talk to our team and talk to our kids about nature. And it’s not just don’t kill bugs. And it’s not just pick up trash. It’s how do we stop and enjoy and recognize that we’re living within, amongst this surrounding and because of this, we’re having this experience- because this place is part of our community, our soccer class, for instance, is more enjoyable.

### **Conclusion: Rhizomatic Education and Critical Pedagogy as COE Complements**

In the end, I have arrived at an idea that is less than novel; since its modern conception, place-based education has advocated approaching ‘place-as-teacher’ in a manner similar to the one presented here (Sobel, 2004). More significantly, many indigenous cultures have worked with place-as-teacher in diverse ways since time immemorial. Such an approach requires that some kind of entity is given to place and the things that make up place including species, stories, cultures, soil, and water. However, critical scholars have been unable to find solid theoretical footing for this work. While critical pedagogues of place hope that anti-oppressive place-based education will allow all learners to reinhabit place regardless of their identity

(Greunwald, 2003), ecojustice place-based educators seek more diffuse avenues for justice in a place (Bowers, 2008), and land educators seek a multiplicity with some deference to indigenous agency (Tuck et al., 2014). However, a rhizomatic approach to curriculum inquiry decentralizes the universal claims that place these fields at odds with each other. In explaining his vision of a relationship between critical pedagogy and place-based-education, Stevenson (2008) states:

There are both junctures and disjunctures between the two traditions. However, social change itself is a dynamic process of junctures and disjunctures, continuities and discontinuities, and so a critical pedagogy of place (broadly defined) can be commensurate with the disjunctures or divergences with which we must live and from which we must learn. (p. 358)

For the field of OE, I believe that embedding ‘place-as-teacher’ in COE builds from the junctures and disjunctures of critical pedagogy of place, ecojustice education, and land education in a way that remains underexplored.

I began my analysis by describing the most common discourses that participants, staff and I used to explain and understand my COE wilderness program. Generally, these discourses fell into two categories: pervasive and counter. The pervasive discourses all appeared in data gathered before, during and after the program and included bonding/teamwork, challenge, and comfort-zone. These discourses are reflective values that are common and often foundational to OE programs. The counter discourses reflect transitions from one set of values to another and included a generalized nature to storied land, neutrality to injustice, and from peaceful depictions of nature to gratitude towards place. In trying to conceptualize the interaction of these two types of discourse, my instinct was to position them opposed to each other. This interpretation was validated by my understanding of ‘critical consciousness’ (Friere, 1973); awakening participants to oppression meant exposing the narratives that are hidden by dominant discourse. However, as I interrogated this with discursive and rhizomatic theory, it became clearer that this approach alone meant that I allowed no room for participants to

inscribe their own narratives and that it positioned my relationship to participants as more significant than participant relationships with place. I began to turn to what I now call a social-ecological COE; one in which participants are asked to listen and speak to entities of place but through a frame that acknowledges that settler colonial systems have hidden such place-based relationships from these youth.

To design and teach outdoor education that is both critical and discursively complex means treating participant interactions with land as the expression of a social relationship. Miguel, a teenage participant in my program, reminds us just how rhizomatic these relationships are when explored critically:

I wouldn't say they [local communities] deserved [to be relocated in order to build the NYC reservoirs] it because no one deserves bad things in their life, but they kind of deserved it because that land wasn't really theirs, but then it also landed in the government's hands anyway.

Here, there is not one united discourse that explains Miguel's relationship. He clearly perceives himself enmeshed in a diffuse social web. While complicated, this kind of thinking also led Miguel to assert (in his journal) a solidarity with the Lenni-Lenape and a claim (in a group reflection session) belief in the need for the recognition of cultural diversity in the Catskills.

Where this manuscript ends and this conversation pauses, is on the question of how to help participants like Miguel decide what to do next. Meaningful relationships with provisioning places require reciprocity. OE has been criticized for its inability to integrate into the daily communities of participants (Bell, 2003). The community that one enters into through OE rites of passage is subsequently disbanded and the cultural context vanishes. Conversely, all of the relationships encouraged through a COE approach are long term and connect to participant's (and their community's) lived experience. Thus the lack of a persistent social context is one major roadblock to full group engagement with a social-ecological program. However, mechanisms that preserve this community and culture, such as those at the disposal of schools

or youth development organizations, are commonly connected to OE and may stand a greater chance of merging place and the social environment. For example, schools and youth development organizations can and do structure ceremonies and long-term service projects. These kinds of practices continually interject into social space and can therefore bring critical relationships to the forefront of participant social interaction.

While I may not conclude this manuscript with any more salience than a rhizome, I do believe that this study has transformed my practice. The following chapter will re-explore this same narrative from the perspective of educator identity. In this way I hope to illuminate the importance of journeys for educators seeking to enact critical and relational practice.

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## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Critical Identity Development in an Outdoor Educator**

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## **Abstract**

As a field, outdoor education is increasingly concerned about the presence and resistance of whiteness, racism, and settler colonialism in outdoor curriculum. Educator identity research is an underrecognized but important facet of such analysis and pedagogy. It grapples with how outdoor educators understand the social role of their work and their relationship to learners and places in which they work. Here I use autoethnographic methodology and performativity theory to analyze the narrative of my identity formation as a white outdoor educator working with youth of color, urban youth, and poor youth. Initially, my work and education forced me to notice how my wilderness performativity enforced inequity. I began to shift the goals of my OE program and started talking to participants about marginalization in the outdoors. Then, through theoretical exploration, I started to acknowledge different outdoor performativities as expressions of different environmental values. Subsequently, I theorized a 'critical outdoor education' grounded in the idea that my participants experienced different, not less, connection to nature. Ultimately this forced me to confront my own relationship to both participants and the places I work, the latter of which I have given far less attention. I use my journey to delineate a major lesson for outdoor educators: as we seek to incorporate justice and anti-oppression into our work, we cannot see ourselves as simply positive or neutral agents in the defense of place. Outdoor educators must know when we benefit from systems that have harmed places and give agency to place in our programs.

*Keywords:* outdoor education, environmental education, place-based education, diversity, inclusion, whiteness, critical pedagogy, critical pedagogy of place, autoethnography

## Introduction

Educator identity research is an important facet of outdoor curriculum studies. It is one of the few fields that inquire into how outdoor educators understand and come to understand the social role of their work, their values, and their relationship to learners, which inform all of their (our) pedagogical decisions. Moreover, educator identity inquiries are particularly relevant to pedagogy that centers identity and diversity, which is in increasing demand across the field of outdoor and environmental education (Diversify Outdoors, 2018; Melanin Base Camp, 2020; Wattchow and Brown, 2011). Many educators and organizations are experimenting with and implementing practices that use power and privilege to understand problems of diversity in outdoor education (OE) including social justice education (Warren et al., 2014), critical pedagogy (Gruenewald, 2003), or ecojustice education (Griswold, 2017). Throughout these fields, educator development tends to be eclipsed by curriculum theory and evaluative research. Yet educators who teach about power or injustice should understand how they are personally responsible for justice and researchers need to support such educators by offering tools and frames for exploring their relationship to said justice. In response to this need, the following narrative autoethnography documents a theoretical journey that has greatly improved my OE practice. I use a performative analysis to examine my identity construction as I attempt to implement critical frames in my work.

The central inquiry of this manuscript is: how do the cultural contexts of outdoor fields construct and change my own oppressive and liberatory values as an outdoor educator? My analysis pays special attention to ways I have performed whiteness in my OE work and considers how I can and do support justice through my interaction with this cultural context. Likewise, the two permeating objectives are: 1) to reflect vulnerably and honestly on my social identity in order to bring clarity to the interaction between my professional context and my practice; and 2) to align myself among educators with whom my story resonates so that we may better construct communities of dialogue and liberation. My original contributions to knowledge



are the assessment of cultural influences on anti-oppressive education within the field of outdoor education and the justification of specific reflexive considerations (i.e. the relationship between educators and contested places) for educators working in these cultures.

In this chapter, I first justify the application of autoethnographic methods and describe the research site. Then I provide a narrative of my professional life, which is broken down into two parts. The first and most extensive, titled *Performing the Outdoor Guy, Relating to Youth*, describes how my identity evolved in relation to my OE participants, particularly as I learned to recognize race as a significant mediator of relationship to the outdoors. This storytelling is interrupted with theoretical perspectives, particularly performativity, which can be recognized by the word ‘*Theory*’ in the sub-titles. In this way, a combination of theory and narrative reveal the rationalization and design of a critical OE- one that attempts to counter white and privileged narratives of land, and encourage participants to inscribe more just narratives.

The second part of my narrative, named *The Cultural Conflict of an Educator Relating to Land*, considers how my practice reveals and targets the oppressive assumptions that construct my relationship to the places in which I work. This latter section discusses reflections that have been given too little attention in my career but are important for land-centered anti-oppressive practice. My analysis determines that outdoor educators should be taught to examine their relationship to both participants and places as they develop their professional identity.

It is important to note that this research documents an ongoing process. In writing this, I acknowledge the fallacy of perceiving the conclusion of my narrative (i.e. the current state of my identity) as the most liberated or anti-oppressive, because that is where my most recent analysis has led me. However, not only do I expect my identity to continue to shift, but I consider all parts of my journey to be valuable to my practice- even those that I am critical of here.

### **Autoethnographic Methodology**

Autoethnography is one of many qualitative research branches that was created in critique of more standardized approaches to academic knowledge. Many of these

methodologies were responses to the arrival of postmodern and decolonizing theories, which tend to be extremely critical of positivism (Adams et al., 2015 pp. 8-19). This historical turn is often called *the crisis of representation* (Marcus and Fischer, 1986) because it challenges the previously accepted notion that researchers can approach a universally truthful representation of the study subject. Like self-study, participatory action research, and narrative inquiry, autoethnography understands that the researcher's worldview is fundamental to the design, implementation, and interpretation of research, and that scholars can answer questions during and through critical reflection of their perspective rather than by trying to remove their influence: "proximity, not objectivity, becomes an epistemological point of departure and return" (Conquergood, 2002, p.149). Traditional scholarship's obsession with objectivity is a cultural value arising from specific social contexts (i.e. western, colonial, or academic), and therefore only one way of understanding a phenomenon. When researchers attempt to objectify a study subject, they obscure the knowledge that is built from the relationship between researchers and subjects. Yet it is these relationships that are centered in self-evidence methods. Therefore, autoethnographers do not study themselves as much as they examine their relationships to specific aspects of their social and cultural life.

What differentiates autoethnography from other self-evidenced methods, is its evaluation of the sensibilities and conceptualizations of the self. Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p.739). However, Coia and Taylor (2005) are careful to distinguish autobiography from autoethnography: the former describes the thoughts and story of the self, while the latter analyzes these thoughts and stories within broader social contexts. Adams et al (2015 p.26) lists the priorities of autoethnographers:

1. Foreground personal experience in research and writing
2. Illustrate sense-making processes
3. Use and show reflexivity

4. Illustrate insider knowledge of a cultural phenomenon/experience
5. Describe and critique cultural norms, experiences, and practices
6. Seek responses from audiences.

The current study is modeled off these principles as well as Boylorn and Orbe's (2014) and Adams' (2017) delineation of critical autoethnography, where reflection specifically addresses social injustices and ultimately seeks to challenge such hegemonies. For Boylorn and Orbe (2014), critical autoethnography "requires researchers to acknowledge the inevitable privileges [and offenses] we experience alongside marginalization and to take responsibility for our subjective lenses through reflexivity" (p.15). Therefore, my analysis will pay special attention to ways my own privileges or entitlements have produced injustice and I will consider how I can and do support justice as an outdoor educator. Adams (2017), adds that in order to do this, a certain kind of forgiveness is helpful for discussing "how to live with individuals--ourselves included--who have been complicit in and/or committed these offenses" (p.80). This critical forgiveness is a mindset that I attempt to carry throughout this chapter.

The structure of autoethnography methods is comparatively diverse. Researchers may create data sets out of personal journals, narrative essays, dialogue, interviews, photographs, and artifacts (Muncey, 2005; Wall, 2008). Because my autoethnography examines how I have come to construct identity around the outdoors, and how my work as an educator shifted this identity, data included journals from two seasons of employment as an outdoor educator, transcribed dialogues among myself, my participants, and my co-workers from one season of employment, and a timeline of my perspective on the outdoors created from my memories. The journals and transcripts were coded individually and inductively, and later the codes between these data types were merged to show consistencies or shifts in my relationship to OE. My personal timeline was broken into distinctive eras of my identity and filled with discrete events that characterized each era. The codes and narratives that emerged through the three data

types are used to construct a story in prose of my development as an outdoor educator including the experiences that led to my desire to write this critical autoethnography.

For analysis, autoethnography is not constrained to academic theory and scholarship; doing so would counter the validation of diverse ways of producing knowledge that autoethnography promotes. Instead, analysis is guided by whatever it is that causes the narrator to reflect deeply and helps explain their experience to themselves. The current autoethnography is analyzed through three main sources of personal reflection: academic scholarship, literature (especially science fiction), and the youth participants of my OE programs.

### **The Study “Site”**

The notion of ‘study site’ must be considered metaphorically in the context of this autoethnography. The subject of study is my identity as an educator, which is influenced by diverse elements across my life. Therefore, the scope of my narrative is my childhood to the present. However, much of the analysis will center my work with the Fiver Children’s Foundation, since this is the most extensive and relevant part of my career in OE, spanning ten years of my professional life.

The Fiver Children’s foundation is a non-profit youth development organization serving youth ages 8-18 living below the poverty line in New York City and Madison County, New York. Youth are referred to Fiver by other community partner organizations in these target areas. Approximately 85% of the children and families live in New York City with the majority centralized in the neighborhoods of Fiver’s community partners: Mott Haven, East Harlem, Harlem, Jackson Heights, Jamaica, Sunset Park, and East Flatbush. The remaining participants live in rural Madison County within 30 miles of our summer camp in Poolville, New York. During the data collection period (2018), Fiver served 470 children in addition to offering support to 200 alumni. The Fiver program participants were 48% Latinx, 29% African-American, 15% Caucasian, 5% multi-racial, and 3% Asian. Over 40% live in single parent homes and an additional 8% reside with other relatives or foster parents (Fiver Children’s Foundation, 2018).

Fiver is grounded in the principles of positive youth development (PYD), and like other PYD organizations, it has a strong model of progress and achievement that participants work through as they age. Fiver is deeply intentional, with a progressive theory of change revolving around three core outcomes: Civic Mindedness, Healthy and Ethical Life Choices, and Education and Career Success (Fiver Children's Foundation, 2013).

Fiver offers year-round programming in diverse aspects of life including emotional wellness, ethics, college/career preparedness, public speaking, environmental education, and health. A cornerstone of this Fiver programming is Camp Fiver, a rural sleep away camp in central New York, which all participants have the option to attend (free of charge) for two weeks every summer. The OE program studied here is called 'Wilderness' and operates out of this summer camp; all participants of a certain program stage (usually around 15-16 years old), are required to prepare for and attend a four-day outdoor backpacking trip in order to progress to the next program stage. For the last several years, my role has been to design this program, teach participants backcountry skills for four days before the trip, and then facilitate the trip for the following four days. Therefore, my OE program is just one in many programs working simultaneously to offer developmental experiences.

### **Performing the Outdoor Guy, Relating to Youth**

The colloquial subject 'the outdoor guy' is used in the title of the section to describe my ever-evolving relationship to the outdoors. Being an outdoor guy is intentionally gendered and places me in a category with others of similar aesthetics and values, many of which will be delineated below. Yet what is also clear is that my relationship to the outdoors is informed by as many friends, peers, family, colleagues and students/participants who do not identify as 'outdoor people.' My autoethnographic data reveals that an understanding of myself in both relation to and reflection of others, especially my youth participants, is fundamental to my educator identity. In acknowledgement of this, I sought theory that would help me understand the social circumstances of my educator identity. While diverse, identity theories tend to describe the

process through which one's self conception, particularly with regard to group membership, mediates one's understanding of the world. Through most lenses, identities are not "unified or fixed; they are always in flux, always multiple and continually under construction (Danielewicz, 2001, p. 10)." However, identity can be as salient and sturdy for individuals within moments, as it can be called into question at others. To examine my identity in relation to Fiver participants, I eventually turned towards performativity, which was introduced to me in diverse coursework over my education.

### **Theory: Performativity Theory as Identity Development**

Performativity theory is an alternative to approaches in which actions and decisions are considered outputs of identity, or in which identity is constructed for a person by larger society. In this rationale, a performance includes all the communication used in an event to navigate social interaction. Foci of performative inquiry may be language, manner of speaking, body adornment choices, and body language. In the constructivist view posed by Butler (1988), performances constitute identity by defining relationships among people. Likewise, performativity is the delineating of an identity through repeated performances by many individuals in a society over time (Diamond, 1996). Therefore, through performativity, the social norms for particular identities are characterized.

Ehlers (2006) explains performative identity development in two stages: first, a person's identity is named by others in repeated normalizing ways; then the person assumes this name in some interpretive and dynamic form:

This takes place when the subject responds to the name through which she is called into being and when she then negotiates with the normalised acts and behaviours that are seen to be associated with the name and that mark the subject's 'belonging' to the category. (p. 154)

However, in the frame of this autoethnography, performativity is not a purely constructivist theory; the agency and thought processes of the self are as important to identity as social

influence. Instead, performative identity emerges from constant communication between the self's interpretation of others and interpretation of itself. For example, when I am the tallest person in a room, everyone in the room has amassed larger social connotations about the quality of tallness that influence the way I present and understand myself. Typically, I feel slightly more powerful or entitled in the presence of shorter folks. Then, both my vantage over other's heads and the way people treat me because I am tall impact my behavior choices, which in turn, results in social feedback that alters my self-perception, which impacts my behavior, and so on. Furthermore, my identity may be called into question when others point out how my performativity (and it's reception) contrasts with that of shorter folks. This may cause me to reflect on my own feeling of empowerment relevant to my tallness and I can decide to accept or refute the existence of inequities surrounding the quality of height. Then I can alter my performativity in a way that seems appropriate to the values that emerge from this reflection. In this example, the identity 'tall' is dynamic, operating diffusely in changing environments. This is because performative identity is neither an internal state that we express through our behavior nor a system of static qualities that set behavioral expectations; behavior is a part of identity itself.

Educational professions are performative in nature (Vick and Martinez, 2011). As educators, we teach from our understanding of the relationship we have to our students, which is informed by our understanding of the social world. Teachers are constantly engaging performatively by making decisions about norms of interaction, pedagogical structure, and expectations. If you have ever experienced the emotional and physical drain of having to be "on" for hours of teaching, you might understand the amount of performativity required by educators.

### **My Early Outdoor Performativity**

I use performativity in this autoethnography because my knowledge of myself as an 'outdoor person' is clearly the product of the social influences and the performative decisions I've made in diverse social realms. My passion for the outdoors is undoubtedly connected to

early positive experiences in natural settings, especially annual family vacations in the Adirondack Mountains and frequent exploratory trips to parks/refuges around Long Island. I also have a complex history with the Boy Scouts of America; although I hated the hazing and types of hyper-masculinity that came with the program, most of the skill sets and knowledges that are important to my identity were initiated by experiences and leaders in the scouts.

By late adolescence 'the outdoors' was a significant theme in my life. I expressed this identity primarily through my taste in media (e.g. survival novels, safari-style television shows, pioneer-era historical fiction), my occupational decisions (e.g. summer camps, adventure challenge courses, majoring in biology education) and my leisure decisions (e.g. bikes rides to wooded parks, backpacking trips, rock climbing). Additionally, the outdoors mediated and mediates my relationship with family and friends. I continue to be the one who plans, prepares, and sets guidelines for outdoor experiences with peers and family.

Yet a performative analysis looks at both my actions *and* how my actions inform knowledge of myself. I was and am empowered by my work outdoors. These skill sets and experiences make me feel competent and useful. For example, at my place of work I am one of few staff who has a proven calmness around bears or who can start a campfire in the rain. This knowledge is self-assuring and drives me to learn more. Furthermore, in my frame of reference, the backcountry has tested my perseverance and I have passed, which is an extremely gratifying and motivating thought. Similar empowerment and well-being outcomes are also well documented in outdoor educator and wilderness therapy literature (for examples see: Cole et al, 1994; Humberstone & Stan, 2009; McGowan, 2016; Shellman, 2014; Sibthorp et al., 2007; Welsh et al., 2020; ); in this way I am an archetype of OE's generalizable impacts.

Still OE is not so positivistic as to presume that outdoor experiences necessarily produce the same effects across different individuals. For example, in contrast to my brother, who expresses his love for nature in a more quantitative field (sustainable architecture), and my sister, whose profession (orthopedic surgeon) has only distant connection to the outdoors, I am



the only sibling who seems to be deeply validated by the act of being outside. This occurred despite the fact that we all participated in similar outdoor experiences during critical moments of development. If the outdoors produced universal impacts, then we might expect much more overlap between my siblings and my interests.

In continuing to circle around these questions (why me? and why in this way?), one thing that emerges is a deep resonating aesthetic. It is not just the act of being outdoors that has constructed my identity but the language, imagery and narrative that comes with it. For example, as an outdoor educator I used to explain backpacking to my participants as “getting everything you need to keep yourself alive and strapping it to your back.” The visual of tightening straps to a singular back evokes a strong individualism and the use of the word ‘alive’ romanticizes the lack of external support. Importantly, this iteration of backpacking is expressed poetically or artistically; I use language to evoke and provoke as much as to define. Yet this imagery is not my own invention but clearly reiterated in many forums that I’ve already mentioned including survival literature, wilderness tourism media, and American historical fiction. These works discuss a kind of individual spirituality that can only be found in the wilderness. In this way, the imagery of individualism situates my performativity in socio-cultural constructions of wilderness and, in doing so, mediates the empowering impacts of my outdoor experiences.

However, shifts in my outdoor aesthetics emerged during the early parts of my work in OE. Over the first few summers of my employment with the Fiver Children’s Foundation, I developed an interest in country music, a love for driving the camp pick-up truck, a taste for farm-fresh foods, a fearlessness around wild animals, and attraction to several other objects or practices that are synonymous with tropes of rural-American culture. Practically none of these interests existed previously. Yet, these qualities did not come about because I was surrounded by people with this rural aesthetic, but because I started to see myself as a representative of this place in the context of my work in OE. While my upbringing was definitively urban/suburban,

in my early 20's I developed a strong identification with the agro-belt of Central New York (CNY), which I justified through my college experience and my continued summer employment at Camp Fiver, both of which occurred in CNY. In comparison, most of the other staff were from New York City, other dense urban areas, or other continents, and a strong majority of the participants were also from New York City. Interaction with these people within the context of CNY taught me that my knowledge of and fearlessness around rural places was unique. These friends were in my home and I was validated by teaching them about it, often lightly mocking their apprehensions of rural and wilderness landscapes.

It is also important to note that about 10-15% of the camp participants are from the area immediately surrounding the camp (CNY). In recent years (and in reflection) I worry that I have essentialized or asked these "upstate" campers to perform this rural identity along with me without giving agency to their own sense of self. For instance, I often asked these individuals about places, people, or schools that I am familiar with not just to show interest in them but to demonstrate my authority to comment on their lives. In this way, it has been important to my own sense of self to perform this rural identity.

### **Divergence in my Outdoor Performativity**

At this point, readers will probably notice that I like to be seen as unique and knowledgeable- both of which are qualities that can be traced to aspects of my lived experience that far predate my work as an educator including my position as a middle child, and, according to my friend Simone, my astrological sign (Leo). However, readers might also notice a change in my attention to these needs in the above narrative; in my late adolescence I valued adventure and dissociation from daily life, while at the beginning of my OE career I began to value permanency of place and community in rural environments. This personal shift is representative of my perception of a larger cultural tension between two large American outdoor performativities. In categorizing these two performances, I name my initial outdoor values 'wilderness connection' and my later outdoor values 'rural connection.' I understood this duality

through the performance of both identities; wilderness people shop at Patagonia and the North Face stores, while rural people go to the Carhartt outlet; wilderness people adorn puffy coats of diverse colors while rural people wear canvas jackets of earth tones, camo, and blaze orange; wilderness people take excursions to the outdoors, while rural people live within the outdoors; wilderness people draw value from new challenging experiences, while rural people are empowered by deep knowledge of one place; and most importantly, wilderness people need surplus money and predictable leisure time to engage with nature, while rural peoples can be poor and interact with nature as part of their daily existence. While the reader may or may not have any personal reference points through which to grab ahold of these differences, it is important to recognize that I am not necessarily naming this tension to characterize American outdoor movements, although I value scholars who approach history this way (For examples see: Cronon 1996; Lewis, 2007; Nash, 1967; Nelson & Callicott, 2008). Rather, I am explaining how I understood the outdoors for my own performative identity at this stage of my life; I began to perceive this cultural tension when working at Camp Fiver and I altered my performativity in response to my valuation of more rural outdoor values.

While many shifts in my sense of self accompanied this transition in group association, one assumption emerges that is absolutely imperative to my journey: that wilderness is enmeshed in a system of class privilege that demeans and oppresses poor folk. The shift in how I identified my cultural affiliation (i.e. from wilderness values to rural values) was not because I inexplicably gravitated towards one more than the other, but because wilderness culture came to be problematic to my worldview. To explain this sentiment, I would name wilderness as privilege and point to the expense of backcountry gear and the emphasis on leisure over 'work' in wilderness recreation, which is a luxury that poor folk might not have. These were the first moments where I began to understand that my participants, who necessarily live(d) in poverty (at least when they entered the program), may not be reflected in my original wilderness conception. Acknowledging this fact was partly the result of my education; terms like 'privilege,'

'power,' and 'oppression' were taking on deep and well-defined meanings in my classrooms during this transition. Yet I also received many lessons from the youth participants at Fiver. I remember often feeling like the teens were not latching onto the wilderness relationships in the way I expected. While they could talk eloquently about the things they learned through challenge, they just did not seem to be moved by the experience of hiking or as deeply touched by loon and coyote howls as I am. I entered the job assuming that these participants had a smaller or misguided relationship with nature because of the lack of opportunity in urban environments, and that I would do good work by filling in this gap in their relationship. After all, organizations like NOLS have demonstrated great improvements in poor youth of color attitudes toward wilderness, even though those same youth started with more negative attitudes than typical NOLS participants (Gress & Hall, 2017). However, what I encountered was the hint of fundamental differences in my and my participants outdoor performativity. Outdoor educators Rose and Paisley (2012) not only describe a similar disjuncture between their expectations and the feelings of their 'scholarship participants' (i.e. poor youth), but also name these encounters as important to their eventual questioning of outdoor values.

While my initial response to the realization that Fiver participants might have different rather than less valuation of the natural world was to attempt a more working-class performance around the outdoors (i.e. this rural outdoor identity), it sparked deeper ongoing reflection. While my attachment to CNY has remained, in my current conception the notion that rural outdoor relationships emerge from disprivilege is full of fallacies, one of which is that white rural peoples are simply victims of inequity. In the last few years, I have spent a lot of time learning how both wilderness and rural American performativities reiterate white supremacy and subjugate the worldviews of Indigenous peoples and other people of color. Therefore, the next section will explore whiteness as a part of my performative identity in OE.

## **Theory: Whiteness Performativity**

Several critical scholars have suggested performativity as a means of understanding racial power structures. This body of theory is inspired by Butler's (1993) analysis of gender performativity. Fundamental to both gendered and racialized performative power systems is the notion that identity performance can iterate and reiterate the dominance of certain performativities (i.e. men-ness or whiteness) and ultimately certain people (men or white people).

To characterize white performativity, Warren (2003) compares material and rhetorical conceptions of whiteness. In material perspectives, race and its accompanying (dis)privileges is ascribed to a person based on the amount of pigment produced by that person's skin as well as other physical features (i.e. the material of their body). As an example, McIntosh (1988) famously listed a number of privileges she automatically receives because she inhabits a white body. This perspective also informs many American racial identity development models which describe the experience of coming to learn that the self is White, Black, Middle Eastern, Latinx, Asian, Native, etc., based on how one and one's people are treated in society (for examples see: Tatum, 1997). In this way, society reads the material of the body to allocate privilege.

However, material whiteness depends on "the body as a visible and stable representation of race categories" (Warren, 2003, p. 18), which is essentialist and may not fully capture the function of race. Alternatively, rhetorical whiteness recognizes that while there are systems of racial privilege. White folks learn to levy the power of whiteness through situational, communicative, and ultimately discursive means. Much of this power is expressed through the process of norming. Montag (1997) argues that the norming of whiteness is so severe that the quality of humanity is often equated with whiteness. In this way, communicating one's participation in whiteness lends that person more authentic humanness and, subsequently, power. Resisting racial inequity means challenging extremely strong social and cultural norms.

To Warren (2003), performativity combines both material and rhetorical approaches, which I conceptualize by turning to science fiction- a genre that has always helped me question my own assumptions- rather than to more academic scholarship. In Ann Leckie's (2013, 2014, 2015) "Imperial Radch" trilogy, the dominant culture of the intergalactic social-political entity known as the Radch is an effective parallel of whiteness. For instance, the conception of the Radch as a unitary identity was invented when the some Radch political entities began annexing other planetary systems and needed an identity to define their citizenry, much like whiteness solidified in global history as Europeans needed to differentiate themselves from and explain their violence toward the people they colonized. Furthermore, the Radch does not consider any peoples to be human until they are fully annexed, which is a strictly political process. In fact the word for citizen, "Radchaai," is synonymous with humanity or civilization, which echoes the 'doctrine of discovery' in the Americas whereby lands populated by non-christians were effectively uninhabited and so the genocide, enslavement, or displacement of non-christians was justified. Yet, like whiteness, the ability to wield Radchii culture, which is performed through several signifiers especially use of Radch language, the practice of Radch spirituality, and the covering of bare hands with gloves, depends heavily on one's ethnic background often, but not exclusively, in relation to how recent one's planetary annexation was. Likewise, whiteness has become more and less inclusive of different populations over time. For instance, my insular Celtic ancestors were colonized by white Anglo-Normans and while we have never fully embraced our colonization, our early adoption Christianity and the expansion of whiteness to include ethnic Gaels has allowed us to use whiteness for far more political and social leverage than many other indigenous peoples.

This interpretation of performative power implies that while all individuals have the ability to learn and wield whiteness as a performative tool for social currency gains, we only have our material bodies to perform through, and these bodies have currency unto themselves. The phenomenon of racial code switching, where people of color learn to act 'more white' in the

presence of white people or in white institutions, is a significant example of how performative identity is demanded of and employed by people of color for minor benefit in a way that reiterates the domination of whiteness. Likewise, when white folks adopt ebonics or other Black performativities, they are able to assert a uniqueness or cultivate empathy in ways that Black Americans do not have access to. In this way, material bodies inform performance at the same time that performativity constructs the meaning of material bodies.

### **My White Performativity in Outdoor Education**

Baldwin (2009) describes a performative coupling of whiteness and wilderness in Canadian national identity. McLean (2013) uncovers how this white-wilderness is reiterated in nonformal environmental education. In both these accounts, the innocence of environmental appreciation is a tool used by whites to hide or erase accounts of the violence that white settler societies have exacted and continue to exact on Indigenous/Aboriginal people. The value placed on wild, untouched wilderness, and the narratives of Canadian settlers navigating such landscapes, undermines immemorial Indigenous relationships with the same environment. In this way, wilderness, the outdoors, and even environmentalism become performative tools of whiteness to seize power whilst proclaiming a 'white innocence' (McLean, 2013).

My experience compels me to extend this coupling into my work as an American outdoor educator. While in the backcountry, our mixed race groups encounter many different kinds of racial aggression (mostly micro-). For example, on our wilderness trips we often encounter friendly people who assume that this is the first backcountry experience for the participants, sometimes flat out asking the youth if this is the case. In fairness, this is a true assumption for a majority but certainly not all of the campers. These strangers are usually extremely friendly, welcoming, and I don't doubt that they genuinely hope that the participants have a positive experience. However, after observing this dynamic several times, I began to ask what my participants were being welcomed to and, through this question I eventually recognized that I also performed the role of a welcomer or gate-keeper of the outdoors.

In both my wilderness and early rural performativity, it is clear that I saw myself as a representative of a culture with important opportunities for Fiver participants and staff. Much like the whiteness described by Baldwin (2009) and McLean (2013), this culture positioned the natural world as a socially neutral space with much more important spirituality than that reflected by the hectic, divisive violent lifestyle of modern urbanity; human problems seemed insignificant in the vastness of the stars, the magic of the seed, or the fertility of soil. Therefore, my performative role was to make space for urbanites to see their lives from an external perspective, and in doing so cause them to reflect on broader connections to nature, each other and the earth. In other words, I thought my job was to show participants a good way of being, much like the Radch believe in the universal goodness of their ways.

While the question as to what authority I had to represent or even name wilderness and rural culture is important, the values embedded in these perspectives were more frequent subjects of my reflection. Not only did my point of view echo a 'savior complex' but it actively combated any perspective that perceives American landscapes as contested or storied and is therefore embedded in a white innocence. The enslavement of Indigenous Africans to work American soil, the genocide of Indigenous Americans, the rise and decline of African American land ownership, the millenia of Indigenous sustainable place-based traditions, and the persistence of Indigenous sovereignty are all important narratives in modern Native and Black environmental relationships (Finney, 2014) but were not considered 'environmental' in my outdoor performativity or in the wilderness program that I implemented through this performativity. As stated earlier, my campers did not wholly embrace my valuation of the outdoors and for this reason, I continued to search for relevant curriculum.

A significant realization came in response to a sense of anxiety I would and still do develop around White strangers in the backcountry. This concern was not rooted in the safety of my participants but in how they were perceived. During Fiver trips, this anxiety compelled me to heavily police my participant's interactions with strangers on the trail, in campsites, or even at



restaurants. I would remind participants of manners, rephrase the things they were saying to strangers, or even interrupt conversations to clarify things my participants were saying. For a while, I justified this action with the belief that I just wanted people to better understand my participants. However, as I became more self-aware, this anxiety became problematic. A moment of salience occurred when we encountered a group of youth from another camp. Their leader began boasting about how many miles, days, and peaks were involved in their trip, likely because he wanted his participants to feel accomplished. However, in the process he demeaned us, who amassed far fewer miles, days, and peaks, and infuriated me. When he asked how my participants were enjoying the trip, one youth replied: "I hate it." Alone, this moment would have increased my insecurity. But because this occurred after repeated instances of participants refusing to adopt a love for wilderness, this retort caused me to pause. After some reflection, what emerged in me was a sense of pride for the honesty and self-assertion of this participant. That other leader's words made me angry and anxious, yet my camper clearly didn't care about his values. I began to question whether I should care about meeting such rigorous standards of wilderness challenges.

Emotional moments like this revealed how whiteness was mediating my interaction with participants. I wanted them to perform the role of 'good' Black and Brown kids and I feared that they wouldn't represent themselves well; effectively, I wanted my participants to be positive representations of their race and background as defined by the white norms of wilderness recreation. My expression of anxiety was a performative iteration of white supremacy. As soon as I stopped writing program goals that mandated my participants come to love wilderness like Gress & Hall's (2017) poor youth of color, I found much more success resisting white supremacy in my practice.

### ***Performativity of Outrage***

When I returned to Anne Leckie's (2013, 2014, 2015) sci-fi trilogy in exploration of this autoethnography, I discovered that the power of this space opera is not only that it allows me to

see how my society may appear from a third person perspective, but also that it narrates several effective acts of performative subversion. The protagonist uses a position of political authority to demand equality for fully annexed but, to Radch culture, lesser races of people. In doing this, the character exposes hypocrisies in Radch performativity; all citizens are supposed to have equal rights yet the Radch elite enforce the stratification of society based on ethnicity. By constructing a performativity of resistance based on the Radch's espoused democracy, the protagonist is able to make significant gains in justice. Warren (2003) agrees that, as a theory, performativity allows room for dismantling whiteness in impactful ways: "performativity grants social agents a conceptual lens for meaningful critique, subversive racial politics, and a transformative social project" (p. 35).

My initial commitment to combating whiteness in OE was undoubtedly motivated by a period of performative crisis. By my second or third year with Fiver (age 20 or 21), I had entered a general state of bitterness towards society; I felt like the realities of privilege and oppression had been hidden from me in my upbringing and that my social world was demanding white performances from me, which did not mix well with my general repulsion at being told what to do. For example, while working at an interpretive center the winter after college, this anger put my employment at risk when I told a site visitor that they were 'demeaning' when they explained how bad they felt for me because I grew up in an urbanized area. Importantly, during this time, rebellion, resistance, and subversion became and remain key aspects of my identity as an educator. Through lesson topics and other instructional decisions, I started to communicate to my learners that I was not happy with the structure of the world and that I saw tremendous potential in them to change it. For example, when I eventually settled into school-teaching, I was required to post an inspirational quote above my door; I chose "the duty of youth is to challenge corruption," supposedly said by Kurt Cobain.

My first attempts at subverting whiteness in OE involved manipulation of the logic of dominant society, similar to the actions of Leckie's protagonist. I started to hold discussions

about race during wilderness trips that began with the prompt “what makes us different than other people out here?,” eventually arriving at the fact that we are heterogenous in race while most people we encountered were white. Some enlightening and important dialogue emerged around this question, and I continue to use it, although in more careful ways. I would conclude these conversations by first suggesting that there are forces in the world that don’t want a multi-racial group like us in the outdoors. For evidence I would point to anecdotes from other Fiver experiences, especially the time a group of White women referred to us as “city kids” in a lean-to log, and expressed relief when we moved on to the next campsite. Then I would employ a rights-based sentiment like ‘you all have a right to this place,’ to juxtapose our own marginalization. I justified this rationale by pointing to the values of equal access embedded in American democracy as well as federal and state public lands policy, which generally intends for public forests and wilderness to be used for “the benefit and enjoyment” of all people, regardless of background. The ‘right to recreation approach’ not only helped me grapple with the significant contradiction between professed American values and racist American performativity but is supported by social justice scholars and practitioners (Henderson, 2014).

However, my coworkers and I tended not to be impressed by the depth of thought and engagement that these conversations generated, and I specifically remember a trusted co-leader and anti-oppressive accomplice saying “at least you tried” in a debrief. Perhaps this is because a rights framework doesn’t address the differences between how my participants and I might be experiencing the outdoors. My employment of rights doesn’t offer anything for participants to anchor themselves to in the outdoors other than outrage at marginalization, which may have been more of my own feeling than one of theirs. In other words, my performances of rebelliousness were extremely important to my development as an anti-racist white man, but may not have been relevant for teenagers who grew up aware of such racism. Perhaps then, I was once again hoping my participants would latch onto my relationship to the outdoor industry, now mediated by fury, rather than making space for a multiplicity of values.

### ***Multiplicity of Environmental Performativity***

After taking a summer without Fiver employment, I returned to the wilderness position at age 27. At this point I had begun my doctoral program and turned towards critical scholarship to help understand the dissociation between my pedagogical objectives and the performativity of my participants. Specifically, academic discourse around the wilderness debate, critical pedagogy of place, land education, and Indigenous worldview, began molding my performativity as an educator. In my immediate environment, Dr. Elizabeth Vidon taught me how wilderness and outdoor recreation are critiqued for cultural and gendered supremacies; Dr. Elizabeth Folta taught me how to use didactic tools of environmental interpretation (e.g. interpretive themes), which added poetry and other artistic expressions of knowledge to my lesson design process; Dr. Mary Collins introduced me to the principles of environmental justice and inequity; and Dr. Robin Kimmerer and Neil Patterson showed me the cultural worldviews embedded in different scienceS, which is intentionally pluralized to reflect multiple ways of doing qualitative and quantitative science, and the importance of Indigenous agency in environmental policy. The combined impact of all of this scholarship (both on paper and in person) was my imagination of a critical outdoor education (COE), which is the subject of the first chapter of this dissertation. In my conception, COE 1) attacks the dichotomy that positions wilderness opposite urbanity, 2) teaches culturally contested narratives of the land we inhabit during OE, especially in terms of environmental justice, the removal/genocide of Indigenous people, and conflict among Indigenous, African American and settler worldviews, 3) includes several reflective exercises asking participants to define their relationship to both nature and the land we inhabit, and 4) requires reflexivity in my own practice, often mediated by a personal journal and autoethnography.

This COE has been the subject of my work for the last few years and best captures my current performativity in relation to participants. In grappling with the multiplicity of environmental perspectives across the American landscape as well as the supremacy of White

relationships to the outdoors, my COE acknowledges this dynamic and reveals counter-narratives. One of my most successful activities (in my judgement) asks participants to use their own conceptions of environmentalism to construct a timeline of American environmental attitudes by chronologizing specific pieces of settler visual art from American history. Then I show participants modern and historical Indigenous art, as well as environmental pieces from the Harlem renaissance (e.g. Aaron Douglas' *An idyll of the deep south*, 1934), and ask them to contrast the messages of the settler narrative from these other two cultural expressions. Over the course of the trip, I continue to reference these images and ask participants to identify evidence of the artist's values in our outdoor experience. The goal is that participants recognize how the settler chronology reflects what we typically think of as 'environmentalism' but contains only white performativities while Black, Latinx, and Indigenous narratives of place are displaced. With this idea established, participants engage in reflective dialogues or respond to journal prompts concerning how they relate to the landscape. In this way, COE aims to make ample space for participants to explore their own cultural and autonomous identity while still targeting whiteness.

Through this process, I have also started positioning myself as culturally distinct from participants. For instance, in a discussion about environmental justice during the most recent summer, I told participants that:

I want you to think about your own relationship to nature. I can't tell you what that is because I don't have your experience and your background. I don't know what it's like to be targeted by police because of my race, or made to feel uncomfortable in nature by other people because of my race, or to grow up without a lot of money, or whatever else. And I think you have special and important relationships to land because of the differences between you and me.

I intentionally and carefully explain these differences because owning up to my privilege not only sets a model for vulnerable performativity, but reveals vulnerability in whiteness itself, which makes space for participants to inscribe their narratives.

However, readers might notice that the above quote still reflects my wants; critical examination of my most recent summer reveals that my hopes, desires, and objectives for participants remain inscribed in my work. A more severe manifestation of such ambition can be seen in my words from another conversation about environmental justice with another group:

Tommy: I am teaching you about this because I don't want what happened in Flint [systemic pollution of the water source for a primarily Black community] to happen to you.

This seeming contradiction between making space for personal/cultural environmentalism while clearly communicating my wants remains a complicated performance for me. On the one hand, I recognize that the practice of education without educator-driven goals and objectives is more facilitation than education, and many outdoor educators do find tremendous value in the concept of facilitation. However, I certainly feel some kind of entitlement to 'want' for participants and by framing my goals as something I desire, rather than as something that is important, I am hoping that the authority of my want interacts with some level of deep trust that participants have in me.

While I remain unsure of how to handle this perceived authority, its origins are clear: 1) I feel legitimized by my employment in a youth development organization that has a reputation for sincere care, well maintained family relationships, and effective programming; 2) I have known most of these youth since they were 7 or 8 so we have old and complex knowledge of each other; and 3) I truly and deeply care for their well-being. For these reasons, my current performative identity centers the deep responsibility I feel towards Fiver participants.

However, as I write this, the sentiment of one of my educators, Dr. John Palmer (Colgate University), fills my mind: 'care isn't enough when it comes to white educators.' While I think Dr. Palmer would be happy with the way my sense of care is informed by anti-oppressive social

analysis, it is still uncomfortable to explore my pedagogical desires. After committing to a full summer of intense journaling and reflection, one reason for this discomfort became clear: in encouraging participants to explore personal/cultural relationships to land, very rarely did I ever consider my relationship to the natural world, which was undoubtedly mediated by colonial and racist performativity.

### **The Cultural Conflict of an Educator Relating to Land**

When thinking about why I infrequently interrogate my performance of environmentalism within my practice, even as it obviously shifts, I recognize a kind of arrogance. In the context of Fiver, I often felt the need to be self-assured in my performance of 'sense of place' or environmentalism despite being more than comfortable exposing my insecurities concerning the things I am still learning about my participant's life experience. For instance, I have owned up to racist or classist thoughts in front of staff and campers, but I almost never discussed how this hegemony informs my own relationship to place. I think part of the reason for this is that outdoor and environmental educators are rarely encouraged to enter such reflection, a notion which I will problematize in the third manuscript of this dissertation. However, I also believe that performances of self-assurance can indicate insecurities or gaps in my self-conception. The following section will describe the anxiety embedded in my relationship to land and provide significant direction for my future as a practitioner and environmentalist.

### **My Performance for Nature, not of Nature**

Inquiry into my relationship with place is heavily inspired by comparison of my performativity to indigenous and non-western worldviews, particularly as taught to me by Dr. Robin Kimmerer (Citizen Potawatomi Nation) and Neil Patterson Jr. (Tuscarora Nation) (both at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry). Through their classes, writing, and friendship, I've learned to deconstruct many of the assumptions I carry about environmentalism, especially that human development is necessarily environmentally degrading, that all biodiversity survives better without human interaction, and that cultural/ethnic differences are

irrelevant in the face of environmental catastrophe. As suggested earlier, scholars of land education, ecojustice education, and critical pedagogy of place have positioned these sentiments as part of colonial or white ideology, which means they are not only embedded in specific European traditions, but they reiterate the supremacy of settler values. However, these settler values also tend to objectify nature; they approach all non-human elements as objects upon which to ascribe cultural meaning. In contrast, Indigenous traditions tend to lend non-humans entity or personhood. In this way, when exploring my performative 'relationship' to the natural world from an anti-colonial perspective, I should not examine how I conceptualize nature, but how I actually perform my identity for the natural world, how I engage my relationship to grandmother moon, elder trees, sibling species, etc., how I acknowledge differences, similarities, conflicts, or cooperation between my personhood and theirs, and how these entities react to my performativity and shape my identity as an educator.

Like many white Americans, I rarely construct performative identity for anyone who is not human. The one exception might be with pets, to whom I see myself in a parental role. However, the reason for this gap in performativity is not just because I was never taught to do so; when I grow attached to certain places, yards, bodies of water or living things, I almost have to resist the natural tendency to lend these things personhood. For example, in my field notes I describe a personal dismay about having to move locations for a particular wilderness trip: "I lament the loss of working with that little place." Instead it seems that I avoided reflecting or seeking an origin of this sadness because acknowledging performative relationships with non-human entities forces me to admit to the lack of care, gratitude or concern that I and my people have demonstrated for the entities that allow me to live. Neither my ancestors nor I asked permission from the land to inhabit, change, or destroy it, and overall, we white Americans have been devastating squatters. What's more, the genocide of indigenous peoples and erasure of indigenous narratives in my homes occurred so that I may live and recreate as a member of a dominant group. In this way, I have benefited at the expense of the place. For this reason, many



human and non-human entities have abandoned their relationship with me, and instead of recognizing this, it seemed I expected them to welcome me. For example, I cannot eat or drink from the once provisioning waterways near my hometown but I continue to recreate on them and claim an appreciation for them. Furthermore, when I and my people do restore and benefit from the natural world, we tend to assume it is because of our own strength, agency, ingenuity, and intelligence. For example, when I eat a plant from my garden, I tend not to perform gratitude to pollinators, microbes, sunlight and water, because those things compromise my sense of personal accomplishment. Moreover, I take youth backpacking in biodiverse environments but my field positions the landscape as a barrier for participants to overcome, rather than a provisioning ecology. In my field notes I refer to this as “use over relationship.” In sum, having an identity in reflection of non-human entities mandates working through a significant amount of guilt, grief, and complexity. For me, this has meant recognizing that I am not going to be able to heal or erase the history that links me to injustice in the Catskills, but I can seek out opportunities to reciprocate, take risks, and work on performances of allyship or accomplicity towards the entities embedded in this place. This is a new performativity for me and it will require much more thought and energy.

This essay reflects how I have iterated and reworked my relationship to my participants, and the intense emotional investment I have placed in this journey seems similar to what a performative relationship with place requires. In this way, I have given my participants such energy but not place. However, this thought also suggests that my relationship to participants and my relationship to place are non-interactive elements, and I do not believe this to be the case. The final section of analysis will make a case for why I and other outdoor educators must define our identity through relationships with all the entities that construct our work, including participants, and all the non-humans within the landscapes we inhabit.

## Outdoor Education is Relational

Towards the end of the data taking period, after practicing reflection about my relationship to the Catskills, I describe an emotional interaction:

The roots of my environmentalism are in my love for animals. Today I got a real good look at a mother bear and three cubs. I woke up before everyone and went to the spring to fill water bottles. As I came into the hollow I immediately saw her and her train of cubs- like 30 ft away. Hard to describe the validation I feel. It's problematic but I might take it as a sign that I have earned this opportunity through the emotional labor I've put in.

In critique, this moment clearly rings of what Tuck and Yang (2012) call a 'settler fantasy' where I perceive some message of reconciliation that assuages my white guilt from the devastation my people have caused. Searching for messages or signs of validation, is not what I mean when I argue for lending entity to place, and I do not share this moment as a model. However, I believe I can see this story as both a settler fantasy and an important departure from previous conceptions in which I assumed that relationship with nature automatically came with outdoor activity. Here I believe that I earned this experience by constructing a practice that grappled with the injustice both between myself and my participants, and between myself and the Catskills. Embedded in my notion of 'earning' is not an acknowledgement of my friendship or sameness with any entity of place, but of co-work or co-teaching with place. For example, in my field notes I describe a sense of frustration that occurred when examining maps and trying to discern how my diverse curriculum pieces could be crammed into the same program. Relief from this feeling occurred through the experience of personal exploration of place. The more I engaged with the Catskill mountains and with specific sites, the more opportunities they revealed. For instance, in scouting a particular location, I came across ruins which, upon further research, I learned were the remnants of a 1900's era vacation mansion belonging to a railroad tycoon. This man and his family commissioned several development projects including dams, trout introduction, deforestation and reforestation. This site taught me how to ask participants and myself critical

questions like ‘who gets to decide what good nature is?’, ‘where does their power come from?’ ‘how has recreation reinforced privilege?’ and ‘what power does and should your community have in making decisions about nature?’

In another example, and one of the most memorable for me, participants were asked to write a journal entry in which they identify with one non-human entity of the Catskills. One participant chose to compare herself to beavers because “we both have big impacts on things. People know when I’ve been there.” The following summer this participant chose to go on the trip a second time in order to accompany a friend who otherwise would’ve been the only young woman on a trip full of young men. Between her first and second trip, beavers had returned to what was a backcountry meadow on the first trip and a pond in the second. While camping on this pond, the participant wrote: “now I get to see all the birds, frogs, bugs that the beavers made a home for. I get to see my impact.” This moment was a pedagogical gift from beavers that required my commitment to relationship with this place and these youth. If I had not invested in a performativity of co-teaching or mentee with regards to the Catskills, I may not have made the decisions that led to this extremely relational moment; I likely would not have chosen to return to the same trail, I would not have asked participants to write journals that lend entity to the natural world, and I certainly would not have asked participants to listen to how the Catskills are speaking to them. Importantly, I was a witness, not a teacher to this instance; while I set the stage for it, this moment occurred because of some interaction between my participant’s and the beavers’ performativity. Here, embodying a place-as-co teacher approach paved the way for not only for a deeper ecological education, but also a sense of connection to nature that is highly relevant to this participant. This exemplifies a major success in comparison to the lack of connection and engagement that I perceived in the beginning of my outdoor education career.

## Conclusion

Like chapter one, this manuscript concluded with an idea that is less than novel; since its modern conception, place-based education has advocated approaching 'place-as-teacher' in a manner similar to the one presented here (Sobel, 2004). Such an approach requires that some kind of entity is given to place and the things that make up place including species, stories, cultures, geology, and water. Yet very few texts pay attention to the journeys and place-relationships of educators themselves as they implement such ideas. "Narratives about how professional outdoor educators work, their histories, beliefs, and practices, are few and far between" (Wattchow and Brown, 2011, p. 159). Because of this, performativities that produce oppression, justice or both remain under-interrogated in our field. I believe that my story demonstrates that the values and worldviews of educators matter in the relationships among educators, learners, and place, and that educator narratives are critical for the enactment of just relationships in outdoor curriculum.

As an adolescent I was heavily invested in the wilderness idea. I enjoyed survival novels and found a degree of purity and peace in the Adirondack Mountains that was not part of my home life. However, as I began to learn about inequity and injustice I saw several problems with the cultures of wilderness recreation; namely, I came to resent both the privilege that was required by outdoor hobbies and the way these hobbies defined popular environmentalism. To resolve this issue for myself, I shifted towards an environmental performativity that I perceived as more supportive of the working class, which I call a 'rural' identity here. Yet as I gained experience with racially diverse youth and staff, and as whiteness studies introduced anti-racist theory into my worldview, I came to perceive how my participants of color were actively marginalized by normalized outdoor performativities including my own rural performances, and how I had been complicit in this injustice through my own performances. I felt coerced into participating in racist outdoor performativity and anger became a fixture of my pedagogy. Subsequently, I sought to teach participants to feel such outrage.

This approach did not produce the drive for change that I hoped. My acceptance of this occurred over several years as I began to understand that anger was part of my outdoor performativity as a white man outraged by the ignorance of my own education, but not necessarily something my participants must adopt. Ultimately, an entirely new era of my outdoor pedagogy emerged, characterized by a critical outdoor education. In this lens, I both teach and validate a multiplicity of environmental perspectives that come from race and class informed life experience, but situate these perspectives within a history of injustice that began with the theft of native land.

Yet enacting this critical outdoor education remains a complicated performance for me. It is difficult for me to avoid telling participants how to interpret the outdoors while also avoiding total relativism. Late in my analysis, a clear source of this dilemma became clear; in an attempt to help my participants connect to place, I had been neglecting to grapple with my own relationship to the Catskills as a place. Acknowledging that my white privilege implicates me in much cultural and ecological devastation in the Catskills continues to alter my performativity. I am currently in the process of erasing the arrogant assumption that I have a great relationship with place and replacing it with a deference to place in my teaching. In other words, by working on my relationship to place, which often means seeking opportunities (both in my work and in my life) to reciprocate to nature, indigenous peoples, and other local communities, my curriculum begins to treat entities of place like species, stories, cultures, soil, and water, as co-teachers or teacher mentors. Importantly, my relationship with these entities is permeated by centuries of violence and I think it is necessary to continue to learn how I benefit from an exploitative society. As Tuck and Yang (2012) state in their conceptualization of decolonization: “solidarity is an uneasy, reserved, and unsettled matter that neither reconciles present grievances nor forecloses future conflict” (p. 3).

Ultimately, I remain unsure about exactly what the forests, Lenni-Lenape, local communities, water, mountains, and every other entity of the Catskills think of me just like I am

not always sure how my human teachers, mentors, and co-workers perceive me in non-educational contexts. However, all entities of the Catskills have impacted my professional development, and their needs have molded my professional direction. It is important that outdoor educators embrace this influence and perform their work in solidarity with both participants and place.

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## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Self-study for Reflexivity in Outdoor and Environmental Education**

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## **Abstract**

The fields of outdoor and environmental education (OE/EE) are increasingly concerned about the presence and resistance of whiteness, racism, and settler colonialism in outdoor pedagogy. In this argumentative paper I draw from my research experience as well as methodological theory to make a case for the use of self-study to support nonformal educators in the exploration of justice and anti-oppression in OE/EE. It is important that educators and organizations have tools for reflexivity; not only are OE/EE littered with concepts that crave deeper analysis, but they engage a unique web of social and ecological relationships- outdoor educators have responsibility for both learners and places. Self-study is a practitioner inquiry custom that is well situated for reflexivity because its ontological stance requires that practitioners commit to improving well-being for both learners and place. When we inform self-study with environmental justice, social justice, anti-colonial, and decolonizing theory, it becomes clear that educators should see themselves as embedded in social systems. In this way, the ontological stance does not ask practitioners to consider how educators teach justice and anti-oppression, but how practitioners enact justice and anti-oppression through their work. Through self-study, outdoor and environmental educators consider the specific learners and places that they work with, understand how they benefit from systems that decrease the well-being of these learners and places, and how they are connected to the well-being of these learners and places. I conclude with suggestions for the field might facilitate cultures of self-study inquiry.

*Keywords:* outdoor education, environmental education, self-study of practice, place-based education, diversity, inclusion, whiteness, critical pedagogy, critical pedagogy of place, autoethnography

## Introduction

One result of the push for more diversity, equity and justice in environmental fields, is an interest in educator self-reflection strategies (Bettez et al., 2011; Caesar, 2014; Neilson, 2006; Reid & Payne, 2011, Tan & Atencio, 2016). Often this enthusiasm is guided by identity development principles, which posit that any kind of anti-oppressive work is symbiotic to personal or organizational journeys whereby the underlying philosophies and assumptions that guide an educator's practice are continually assessed and analyzed (for identity development examples see Tatum, 1997). In outdoor and environmental education (OE/EE), these analyses include relationships among practitioners, participants, land, and broader value systems. Particularly, the prominence of white performativities in outdoor fields (Baldwin, 2009; Deluca & Demo, 2008; Rose & Paisley, 2012) requires that outdoor educators look inward and attack the racist assumptions that are built into the foundations of outdoor pedagogy. For instance, Terra Incognita Media (2020) is "a feminist media organization that provides a feminist response to the outdoor industry" (para. 1) by offering workshops and resources that help people conceptualize the function of whiteness and patriarchy in their relationship to the outdoors. This organization is one of many recently conceived initiatives that seek anti-oppression through reflexive narratives in the outdoor industry (for other examples see Brown People Camping, 2020; Diversify Outdoors, 2018; Fat Girls Hiking, 2020; LatinxHikers, 2018; Melanin Base Camp, 2020).

Still despite a desire for such self-reflective methodology in nonformal pedagogy, there is very little theorizing or discussion on implementation. By contrast, self-study is well established in formal education (especially American K-12 schooling) and there is ample deliberation on its actualization, including for equity and justice (Kroll, 2012). While there are several approaches, all self-studies ask teachers to build and share knowledge by collecting information on their own practice. This general procedure, as well as many of the more nuanced strategies and theories offered by self-study scholars are transferable to OE/EE. In analyzing this methodology, I

compare and contrast formal and nonformal applications of self-study, and subsequently provide ideas and models for how it may be implemented in OE/EE.

I will also investigate the theoretical justification for the use of self-study as one means of achieving justice- and equity-informed self-reflection for outdoor and environmental educators. Self-study is a relational inquiry and outdoor education is a deeply relational practice. While formal education is also relational, particularly with regard to student-teacher interaction, outdoor and environmental educators have shifted to be more strongly embedded in relationships with entities of place like local towns, forests, indigenous communities (past and present), geologic features (e.g. mountains, hollows), water-bodies and individual species (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). Furthermore, it is in the performance of the relationships to learners and place where outdoor educators enact colonial assumptions about the role and value of wilderness. For instance, the demand for pristine and untouched wilderness in outdoor recreation erases both indigenous narratives as well as indigenous inhabitation (Spence, 1999), and provides moral justification for settler cultures to continue to abuse the land people do live in and off of (Cronon, 1996). Yet the relationships among place, educators and learners are also the sites for potentially liberating curricula, where practitioners can validate a multiplicity of environmental relationships and demand justice. Doing this requires that outdoor and environmental educators have more intentional tools for conceptualizing their role in these relationships than what is commonly available. I propose a self-study methodology through which educators can consider the relationships among themselves, their learners, and contested places, which are all places that have been altered by settler and extractive colonialism, and make practical changes in response. In this way, self-study can play a critical role in developing anti-oppressive outdoor curriculum.

I will first position myself within OE/EE and delineate my authority to comment on the use of self-study, which largely comes from my practice as an outdoor educator. Then I will define the context of my work and establish a functional scope for my theory. Subsequently, I

will provide a scholar and practitioner informed description of self-study including it's theoretical basis.

### **Positionality**

I am a white man and a millennial. My ancestors are Gaelic-Irish and all settled within Lenapehoking on Turtle Island (also known as the New York City metropolitan area) between 1870-1922. My own passion for the outdoors is undoubtedly connected to significant early positive experiences in natural settings, especially annual family vacations in the Adirondack Mountains and frequent exploratory trips to parks/refuges around Long Island. In these places my dominant memories are of feeling safe, cared for, empowered, liberated, and entertained. For a decade I have spent summers working in different outdoor education positions within the Fiver Children's foundation, a non-profit youth development organization serving youth ages 8-18 living below the poverty line in New York City and Madison County, New York. For many of these years, I have served as the wilderness director, which required me to design, implement and supervise 3-5-day backpacking trips in the Catskill mountains of New York for teenage participants. Here, my concern for anti-oppressive pedagogy and justice was cultivated by co-workers and participants who taught me how inequity, particularly around environmental health and access to the outdoors, is created by broader social, cultural and political systems.

This paper is one of three manuscripts written for my doctoral dissertation, all of which are derived from an increasing sense of conflict between my goals for the Fiver wilderness program and the meanings made by participants. Eventually, this discord merged into my academic studies and I decided to undertake a self-study of my OE practice for my dissertation. Through this research I explore my own values, my participant's experiences, and my practice to explain and improve the relevancy of my pedagogy. The first two chapters describe my findings and consist of an action-research report and an autoethnography. The current manuscript is a theoretical investigation into the broader application of self-study in nonformal contexts.



## **Defining Outdoor and Environmental Education**

Both outdoor education and environmental education resist clear definition because much of the strength of our field comes from its fluidity, adaptability and diversity. The term 'outdoor and environmental education' (OE/EE) is chosen here to encompass all nonformal education that requires or focuses on land, nature, and places. This includes most of the educational work of nature centers, parks, wilderness education programs, adventure learning programs, camps, guiding companies, scouting and other youth development organizations, public/community gardens, and certain museums (North American Association for Environmental Education, 2009). By contrast, formal education about any of these topics is that which occurs in schools where learning is highly structured and content is standardized, often at governmental levels. It is important to note that this scope lightly excludes the tremendous amount of environmental and outdoor education that occurs in schools; many formal educators are experts in incorporating OE/EE into their work and many nonformal educators spend significant time working in formal contexts. However, the argument delineated in this manuscript is mostly applicable to those pedagogues who are principally defined as 'outdoor educators' or 'environmental educators' and who are mostly employed by nonformal organizations.

This scope is selected for a number of reasons. First, nonformal OE/EE tends to be understudied in comparison to formal education and there is a need for more conceptualization of research strategies specific to nonformal work (Romi & Schmida, 2009; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). Second, nonformal OE/EE presents a unique context. While formal educators teach an assigned group of children/youth as they work to attain competencies that are standardized across states or countries, OE/EE goals and curriculum do not often require generalizability across people or places and there are far less constraints and predictability in who outdoor and environmental educators will be teaching. Therefore, methodologies that center the complexity of relationships among educators, places, and learners are extremely important and unique in OE/EE. Finally, as stated earlier, this paper is a response to calls for more anti-oppressive

reflexivity in the field of OE/EE. Wattchow and Brown (2011) present one of the most complete analyses of the social and ecological changes that outdoor education theory has struggled to adapt to. They argue that educators need to question their assumptions about the structure or purpose of their work, and ultimately shift towards place-responsive pedagogy. In the following section, I will delineate the methodology of self-study, which I will then use to argue for its use as a tool to assist in the shift that Wattchow and Brown call for.

### **Self-study: A relational practice**

Through self-study, educational professionals including teachers and administrators, make inquiries of and investigate their practice. Frequently self-study begins with confusions, questions, and struggles that practitioners have about their work. Then the professional designs diverse data collection methods, often both qualitative and quantitative, to provide insight into these concerns. Student artifacts, interviews (with students, co-workers, mentors and administrators), student narratives, practitioner narratives, surveys, and practitioner journals are all common data types in self-study. Ultimately, this research centers the professional objectives of the educator(s). In this way, self-study can either help educators better achieve their goals or be a reflective process whereby educators' goals are re-imagined; the latter of which is particularly useful when the inquiry implicates racist, classist, sexist or any other kind of assumptions that the researcher may carry. Additionally, while generalizability is not essential in this methodology, self-studies have been published in diverse journals in education (for examples see *Studying Teacher Education*, an active journal publishing self-studies).

Self-study is certainly part of broader movements that employ reflection as best educational practice (Reflecting on Practice, 2020). However, self-study began and has predominantly remained within the field of formal education, centering the work of K-12 schools (in the US) and higher education institutions, especially teacher-education programs. Within formal education self-study has multiple converging origins. In academia, the 'postmodern turn' of the 1970s critiqued the positivism embedded in commonly accepted methodologies for

educational (and other) research. In these traditional approaches, scholars isolate variables and try to remove the influence of their own values. Such methodologies make it exceptionally difficult to study highly interactive and synergistic systems like education. Self-study emerged as one of several alternatives that can approach teaching and learning holistically and subsequently, acknowledged the practitioner's and researcher's worldview in the interpretation of this system.

In the non-academic field of education, self-study is part of broader movements to recognize teacher agency. This stands in contrast to many essentialist trends of the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s, exemplified by the Reagan administration's publication of "A Nation at Risk" (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) or the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) which treat teachers as passive deliverers of content. Self-study firmly asserts that educational practitioners are knowledge-producers; teachers become experts by doing the work of education and their understandings are as important as those produced by external observation.

Ultimately, the tensions between positivism and subjectivism, or essentialism and teacher-agency are representative of conflicts between practitioners and researchers or perhaps the subjugation of practitioners by research. Advocates of local knowledge, community generated knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge, and other non-academic sources have critiqued scholarly research not just for its inability to consider whole systems, but also for the way it demeans those practitioners without the privilege or desire to work in academia. Bowers (2001) argues that American culture positions these kinds of non-academic knowledge as "low-status" (p. 19) in order to maintain oppressive cultural hierarchies. In this frame, academia has positioned itself as the highest producer of knowledge with the most accurate mechanisms of validation (i.e. by peer-reviewed and statistically objective methods) when in actuality, there are multiple culturally diverse systems for producing knowledge. Such a tension is extremely apparent in the field of education. For example, Ezer (2009) describes a "paradigm war" (p. 6) in

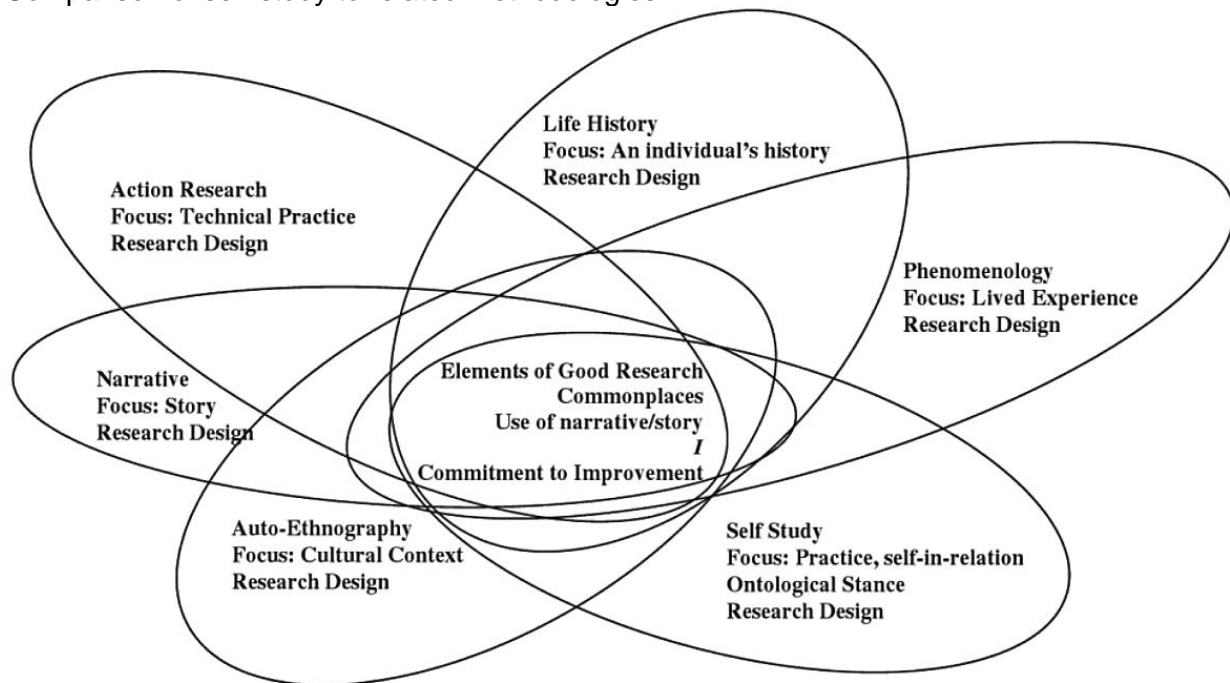
learning research; on one side are psychologists who produce best practices in education by isolating inputs and observing outputs, and on the other side are teachers or teacher educators who have cultivated their practice through experience and reflection. I have personally seen this war waged in educational consulting where one finds a mix of academics with advice or best practices, teachers who are cautious of sources for improving their practice, and teachers who outright refuse to be informed by those academics who are distanced from the daily reality of K-12 instruction.

Yet this characterization of the researcher-practitioner dichotomy is oversimplified and most readers likely see the value in a synergy or middle-ground between these two sides. Both externally-generated and practitioner-generated knowledge have value and it follows that the shortcomings of one can sometimes be reconciled by the other. Self-study asserts itself as such a harmony because it combines rigorous objective inquiry with practitioner's lived experience.

What distinguishes self-study from other participatory methodologies that place interpretive power in the hands of research subjects (or blur the line between researchers and subjects) is its focus on improving lived experiences. In Figure 3.1, Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) compare self-study to several similar methodologies. Here self-study is the only branch with a clear ontological stance; the ultimate objectives of self-study are to better the lives of students and teachers rather than to increase knowledge or better achieve predetermined goals. This is not to say that knowledge production or goal-evaluation cannot be part of self-study, but that they must serve ontological purposes.

**Figure 3.1**

Comparison of self-study to related methodologies



*Note.* Reprinted from *Self-Study of Practice as a Genre of Qualitative Research Theory, Methodology, and Practice* by Pinnegar, S. & Hamilton, M., 2009, p. 67, Springer.

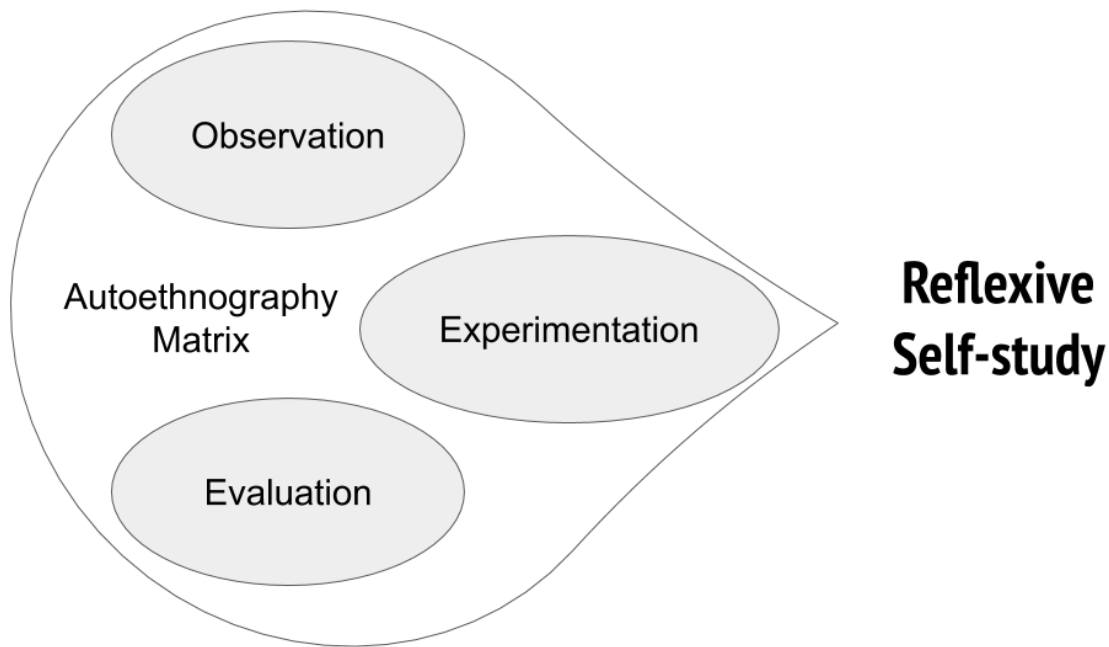
The ontological stance lends researcher-practitioners the authority to comment on what is and isn't good for students, which places the scholars at risk for stripping students of their self-determination and misinterpreting their personal narratives. This concern is particularly important in the context of American racial dynamics where teachers are overwhelmingly white, even in schools where the majority of students are people of color (POC); there are realities of being a POC in America that most teachers don't experience firsthand and allowing white folks to define the problems of and resolutions for POC opens opportunities for subjugation. Likewise, OE/EE ontology (i.e. its goals, objectives and values) has historically centered whiteness and marginalized environmental justice, decolonization, and many other values/practices that seek racial equity in environmentalism. A self-study that operates from this stance will reproduce oppression. However, self-study is frequently used exactly because it is a means of helping teachers understand issues of bias and justice in their classrooms (for examples see: Berg,

2012; Johnston-Parsons et al., 2007; Soslau and Bell, 2018). Self-study centers the relationships enacted in one's practice and subsequently the ontological stance begs for a deep questioning of societal assumptions that characterize the teacher-student relationship. Self-study asks teachers to analyze their understanding of students including significant differences in experience, and to examine the messages that teachers receive about their students from broader entities like media, politics, friends, and family. Through self-study, educators can confront their preconceived narratives and have the opportunity to edit or trash such narratives by listening to and engaging with their students' worldviews. Those who actively apply self-study draw the authority to make decisions about what will improve student's lives from this relational analysis. In a broader research context, this type of inquiry, where practitioners reflect upon the function and impact of their work and subsequently make changes based on this reflection, is often called 'reflexivity' and there is significant demand for it across disciplines (Feucht et al. 2017).

In order to help me understand the function of this reflexive relationality, I created Figure 3.2 to show my reinterpretation of the interactions among different means of assessing education in the production of self-study. Mine is an inclusive model where observation, evaluation and experimentation are possible approaches to answering questions about one's practice but are continually mediated and guided by a matrix of autoethnography. Here autoethnography refers to the process whereby educators account for thoughts and feelings that guide their work and analyze them through broader social theories. This is a reconceptualization of the relationship between autoethnography and self-study in Figure 3.1, where autoethnography is a related but distinct methodology; in my model autoethnographic methods facilitates self-study. In this way, a theoretically informed self-reflection informs all observations, experiments and evaluations of practice as they are used to make ontological changes.

**Figure 3.2**

*Conceived relationships among approaches that can produce self-study.*



This self-study brand of autoethnography does not only oblige in-depth consideration of the practitioner's relationships to students, supervisors and coworkers, but also "the broader context of the socio-political forces within which we work" (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009, p. 57). This tenant is guided by constructivist, postmodern, and discursive theories in which human conceptualization of the world, including our social role and responsibilities to others (i.e. a teacher's role in improving student's lives), is mediated by cultural meaning-making processes. In other words, the ways humans name objects, ideas, entities, emotions, or anything else that allows us to make sense of the world, are fluid and either constructed or influenced by one's social-cultural experience. In terms of human relationships, this means that the ways we differentiate each other and ourselves including by race, class, gender, or profession, involve cultural distinctions that carry significant meaning, and that these meanings are not static. In this way, race, class, gender, age and all other markers of identity mediate the relationships between education professionals and students, and through self-study, educators can play with their role in these relationships for better ontological results. For this reason, self-study often

asks practitioners to identify and attend to the way that power structures like racism, classism, sexism or ageism are enacted in their educational work.

Justice and equity occupy significant space in self-study literature. For example, Kitchen et al. (2006, 2016) compiled assorted self-study investigations into two volumes of 26 chapters that showcase issues of diversity, social justice and equity in teacher education, schools, classrooms, and universities; volume 7, issue 1 (Russel & Berry, 2011) of *Studying Teacher Education* focuses on self-study as a methodology for exploring cultural tensions; and Linda Kroll (2012) published an entire book on using self-study as a means of *Learning to teach for equity and social justice in the elementary school classroom*. Still, for many of us who have used self-study to examine the production of power in our practice, justice and injustice are inherent concepts. If one believes that racism, classism, sexism and other power structures mediate interactions within our educational work, then working towards equity and justice is necessarily part of an ontological stance, and therefore embedded in self-study.

Yet this kind of relational self-study is not something that is done well without significant practice and experience. Throughout this dissertation, I have been explicit about my struggles with the application of this methodology to a novel context. For example, in chapter 1, I document the theoretical battle that emerged in my practice between critical pedagogy and rhizomatic or ecojustice education, and I am honest about not truly feeling capable of resolving this conflict. In chapter 2, I confront many of the oppressive assumptions that have motivated my work, but I acknowledge that there are likely many more assumptions that remain unexamined because I am relatively young and have less experience than other professionals. In both these cases I often found myself craving a better theoretical guidance. In this way, reflexive practice in OE/EE needs significant attention. The following section will briefly review the literature on models for how self-study can be implemented with a particular focus on justice and equity.



## Doing Self-Study

Learning to study one's practice is neither a linear process nor a generalizable model. Because self-study is driven by personal inquiries that require different methods, there will be more differences than similarities among projects. For this reason, researchers will not find many step by step 'how-to' processes in publications on self-study methodology. Instead of teaching a research model, Kroll (2012) advocates for 'habits of inquiry' in teaching fields. A habit is distinguished from other research practices in that it is repeated to the point where it becomes inherent to one's work. In developing such habits, educator's instincts to ask good questions, find appropriate collaborators, seek relevant data sources, and interpret such data evolve and improve. Kroll (2012) states that as educators learn such a habit, "finding the question is perhaps the most difficult aspect of using inquiry as a way to improve one's practice" (p. 97). Often this difficulty arises as educators recognize that they do not have a clear meaning for many of the terms and theoretical concepts that underpin their inquiry. For instance, as I sought to increase the presence of social justice in my work, I needed to define terms like 'justice,' 'equity,' 'inclusion' or 'culturally relevant,' which required deep exploration and reflection upon the theories that inform the use of these terms in OE/EE. Korthagen (2001) and Korthagen and Kessels (1999) study the role of theory for preservice teachers, with particular attention to disconnect between the theory teachers learn in their education, and the work they do as professionals. They argue that instead of applying theory offered by their professors, teachers need to define and cultivate, with theoretical support, their own working understanding of what it means to teach well. This is accomplished first through a personal inquiry into their own concerns and questions, then by taking a student-centered account of student responses, actions, or decisions in light of these concerns, and finally by locating sources of knowledge to develop a personal ontological theory that explains and justifies a new or altered pedagogical approach. For Korthagen (2001), over repeated application this personal theory should eventually become a gestalt (the split-second assessment of needs, feelings, values, and

meanings that lead to a teacher's everyday decisions and reactions). This gestalt-theory is then ready to undergo the inquiry process all over again. Therefore, the theory that underlies one's daily work is often the subject of a habit of inquiry.

It is in this theoretical re-assessment where oppressive assumptions in an educator's work are often exposed. For example, in chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation, I describe how, after years of feeling like I was not setting relevant goals for my participants, I began to search for a more culturally relevant outdoor education. While pursuing my inquiry, the ecojustice theory of Bowers caused me to critique my critical pedagogy approaches to outdoor education for the degree to which they centered my own emotions over those of my participants. Subsequently I drew from curriculum theorist Noel Gough, discourse theorist Michael Foucault, science fiction author Anne Leckie, my participants, and my co-workers to design a personal pedagogical theory that allowed for more participant agency. This example demonstrates the process of encountering confusion, developing inquiry, conceptualizing my personal theory, and modifying practice.

It is important to note that in my example, theoretical influence is not constrained to academic scholarship. The tools used to inform analysis in self-study includes whatever helps an educator define and improve pedagogy; this may include literature, poetry, film, music, mentors, peers, and students. Several self-study experts borrow the use of a 'critical friend' or "a colleague who will provide support and listen, be a sounding board, a critic, an evaluator; whatever role is deemed necessary," (McNiff et al., 1996 in Kroll, 2012, pp. 99-100) from action research. In one teacher preparation course, Kroll (2012) mandated critical friends by forming reflective groups of students and giving them time to meet and discuss their inquiry. This critical friend is one of the tools that validates the rigor of self-study (Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2004). In chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation, one hears the voices of my critical friends, especially my supervisor and close friend, pseudonym Leah, as they challenged me, introduced alternate

ways of interpreting my findings, and ultimately helped me to produce a more ontologically sound program.

Yet, participants and students should also feature in the development of personal pedagogical theory. In delineating an argument for teacher reflexivity as a part of culturally relevant science education for youth of color, Bettez et al. (2011) explains that educators need to “be cognizant of what students share and should continually strive to empower students to claim voice” (p. 948). This requires careful attention to how students are and are not embodying the role of “producers, users, and critics of knowledge” (Bettez et al., 2011, p. 945). Ultimately, an ontological stance requires that what students and participants learn benefits their lived experience, and therefore student assessments of what they take from an experience is paramount.

Finally, a novel addition that this manuscript introduces to self-study is the consideration of place both as a subject and co-teacher in the ontological stance. The significance of place will be delineated over the course of this manuscript but it should be noted here that it is an important element in the relational webs that guide OE/EE practice.

This generalized model of self-study where teacher-driven inquiry is approached through personal reflection and mediated by a broad conception of social theory, is intended to improve teacher awareness of their students, and therefore improve their pedagogy. Kroll (2012) found that “the act of looking systematically undid many unexamined assumptions and turned their [preservice teachers] assumptions into hypotheses” (p. 129). Likewise Makaiau and Freese (2013) argue that “self-study helped us and our students develop the necessary texts for unpacking our previously held stereotypes and biases so that we all could arrive at new understandings about the complexity of our multicultural identities” (p. 150).

The following section draws from these models to lay out an argument for the particular use of self-study in OE/EE, and will offer some suggestions for how it could be implemented.

## **Self-study in Outdoor and Environmental Education**

While there is far less scholarship on the practice of nonformal education in comparison to that on school teaching, reflectivity and reflexivity are represented in OE/EE research. A few publications explicitly document the narratives of nonformal practitioners as they make inquiries of their practice (Gatzke et al., 2015; Bullock, 2014; Newbery, 2012; Rose & Paisley, 2012) while several more advocate for reflexivity or make appeals for it in OE/EE (Piersol and Timmerman, 2017; Ceaser, 2014; Clayton & Dymont, 2013; Payne, 2002). What is clear from all of this is that OE/EE, in comparison to formal education, is an overlapping but distinct context through which reflexivity operates. The following section uses the knowledge produced by this body of scholarship as well as my own inquiry experience to delineate an argument for why self-study is pertinent in OE/EE, which then allows me to begin a conversation about implementing self-study in OE/EE.

### **Why Self-Study in Outdoor and Environmental Education**

An important distinguishing feature of OE/EE is its focus on hands-on interactions with place, which includes the past and present, the human and non-human, and the social and ecological aspects that define an area. This is not to say that other subject areas or branches of education do not teach place in such ways, but when they do, it is often in a manner that spills over into OE/EE. Over the last few decades, nonformal outdoor and environmental educators have given increasing attention to being in, perceiving, experiencing, and building connections with immediate social or ecological landscapes (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). Yet this assertion can be problematic because of the number of concepts it leaves undefined and justifications it leaves incomplete. 'Place,' 'experience,' 'connection,' and 'hands-on' are loaded concepts that carry significant and diverse assumptions about pedagogical ontology. Even the concept of the 'outdoors' is theoretically slippery; outdoor educators might ask where the boundaries of the 'outdoors' are?, how one could be inside shelters like tents, quinzhees and lean-to's but still be 'outdoors'?, and how conceptions of the outdoors are explained and justified. These inquiries

lead to important philosophical achievements like the ‘wilderness debate’ which problematizes assumed benevolences of the outdoors, and offers pathways for more sustainable futures.

Therefore, the first part of my argument for the importance of reflexivity in OE/EE and the potential of self-study is that outdoor and environmental educators need opportunities to explore the underlying ideas of their practice. For example, in order to encourage reflexivity, Payne (2002) provides an important genealogy of the concept of ‘experience’ in outdoor and experiential education. In doing this, he reveals how ‘experience’ is frequently commodified by outdoor education and therefore serves the individualistic and violently capitalist world order that Dewey (1938) resisted when he first theorized experiential education:

Experiential learning and experiential education in the postmodern are extremely complex, their (various) meanings are easily confused, their practices diffuse and open to interpretation and manipulation. Yet, in fields like outdoor education, a consensus about the importance of ‘experience’ often presumes tacit agreements about its meaning(s), rests on totalising and ahistorical critique, endorses key, stable practice(s), follows an almost formulaic approach to its ‘delivery’ and processing/‘debriefing’ and perpetuates major cultural assumptions and outcomes, not least of which is the probable reproduction of the technical reduction and commodification of ‘experience.’ (pp 8-9)

Payne goes on to criticize the use of the term “critical” to describe common outdoor pedagogies that aspire to ecopolitical and ethical praxis but do not question widespread assumptions surrounding “experience” in OE/EE. Payne then theorizes alternative framings of ‘experience’ that are more in line with the “critical” and disruptive intentions of most experiential educators. This analysis and re-theorizing is an example of the kind of reflexivity that outdoor education needs. If Payne had then put these ideas into outdoor education practice and continued to interpret their impacts on ontology, his work would be an archetype of reflexive self-study.

The first two chapters of this dissertation very much parallel Payne’s (2002) analytical journey but model how this might be accomplished through self-study methodology. My

research uncovered significant personal assumptions about the function and effects of the critical aspects of my outdoor program. I often expected that by teaching narratives of colonization, framing them in terms of injustice, and expressing critique of the 'wilderness idea' I was enacting 'decolonizing,' 'anti-racist' and 'critical' pedagogy. However, as I listened to my participants and pulled together diverse theoretical perspectives, I realized that my use of these terms centered my own desires and anger and neglected the agency of participants or place. This ultimately refuted my social justice ontology. The result of the entire inquiry process was a much less tidy personal theory of practice, but one which improves my work.

Yet the ontological frame is important in OE/EE not just because our field is full of poorly defined concepts, but because outdoor and environmental educators have a layer of responsibility that many educators are not taught to consider. As Lotz-Sisitka (2009) points out, it is often a given that the ontological responsibility of outdoor and environmental educators extends to the natural world. While I do believe that all self-study (i.e. in formal and nonformal contexts) should examine ontological impacts on entities besides students like communities and societies, I have also come to learn that relationships to place, including ecology, history, and past/present human communities, are approached uniquely and importantly in OE/EE; effectively place is as much an actor in the relational web of my OE practice as are students, coworkers or supervisors.

I was initially surprised that my self-study arrived at my relationship to entities of place. I expected to reveal oppressive assumptions that I held about participants, and I knew I would learn new things about how my participants relate to places, but in no way did I plan to center my relationships to the Catskill wilderness. Yet I arrived here because place is necessarily an actor in OE/EE and therefore implicated in all efforts to diversify or promote social justice through OE/EE. Every moment of my outdoor program was mediated by plant assemblages, animal activity, weather, decomposition, water, the New York Department of Environmental

Conservation, the volunteers and crews that maintain trails, the rural communities that surround the wilderness, and the original people of the place (the Lenni-Lenape).

Yet awareness of these kinds of interactions are not necessarily new or surprising to outdoor and environmental educators. We tend to value the fact that many of the things that are taught and learned in our work have to do with the decisions made by ecological, environmental, and historical entities. What was new to me was questioning the assumption that my connection to all of these things is necessarily neutral or positive, and I believe this is where self-study has tremendous and unique potential to promote equity and justice in OE/EE. Prior to examining these personal relationships, I inattentively justified my connectedness to the environment with metrics that are common to tropes of environmentalism; I was a 'nature' person because I knew how to camp and hike, spent significant time in the woods, and had good species identification knowledge. These metrics led me to believe that I automatically had strong relationships with nature and place and that my participants didn't. Furthermore, my self-study forced me to confront the extent to which I imagined myself a gatekeeper of this connection to nature. In my role as an outdoor educator, my job was to fill in the gaps of environmental relationships that were removed from my participants because of the nature of urban poverty. However, as I listened to participants and read more environmental justice, anti-colonial, and anti-racist scholarship, it became clear that my participants had a different, not less of a connection to nature, and that their relationships are partially characterized by the experience of bias, racism, and oppression in places. I was driven to scholars like Caroline Finney (2014) and Bob Bullard (1990), who explain how the absence of environmental and social justice in outdoor fields marginalizes African American environmental history, and the environmental values it has produced. This forced me to see my relationship to the Catskills as non-neutral; my environmental connection implicates my whiteness, my gender, my life-experience and many other aspects of my identity as much as discrimination and justice guide my participants relationship with nature. Furthermore, these aspects of my identity do not

necessarily position me as beneficial; for example, because my ancestors made the decision to leave Éire and join settler society in the northeastern US, and because this society has accumulated so much wealth at by extirpating old-growth forest in the Catskills, I should approach my relationship with the forests the way I approach my connection to participants- in recognition of the fact that 1) they may be subjugated by systems that I, as a white person, have benefited from but also 2) that my freedom from a society that normalizes exploitation is wrapped up in theirs.

The realization that the entities that make up the Catskills are not neutral in their interaction with me caused major shifts in my pedagogy. The inclusion of these place-based subjects in my ontological stance was different from ‘teaching well’ for participants; place is both something that my program impacts as well as something that guides my program; it is both a subject and co-worker of my pedagogy. For this reason, my self-study involved deep exploration and careful listening to the history, political/cultural conflicts, and environmental issues facing the Catskills and understanding my role in resolving and perpetuating problems. While I am still making decisions about how to teach well in consideration of the Catskills, I did find it important to enact curriculum that lent more agency to place by putting my participants in conversation with parts of the Catskill environment, with the tribal governments originally indigenous to the Catskills, and to the land itself. In other words, my analysis forced me to better embody the “place-as-teacher” tenant of place-based education, which, according to my analysis of participant interviews and artifacts, was a major benefit to my ontological impacts.

Ultimately, I use this personal narrative to support my argument for personal reflexive analyses of outdoor and environmental educator’s sense of connection to the environment, land and place, particularly as diversity, equity and justice become significant frames. Place is a key element in OE/EE and it is imperative that educators and organizations consider their non-neutral relationship with it. Self-study, with a justice and diversity-centered ontology, provided an effective means of delivering more culturally relevant and anti-oppressive curriculum in my



program. By way of generalizing my experience, the following section will delineate a practical assessment of the challenges and possibilities for implementing self-study more broadly in the field of OE/EE.

### **Self-study Methodologies for Outdoor and Environmental Education: Constraints and Potential**

Like in formal education, enacting self-study in OE/EE requires attention to and practice with reflective processes that work for one's questions and context. All of the guidelines discussed in my *Doing Self-Study* subsection apply here. Those who are academically minded might carry out something similar to my self-study with highly structured data gathering processes, formalized coding systems, and peer-reviewed manuscripts all approved by a review board or other academics. However, a habit of self-study requires only comfort with techniques for answering and evolving questions. Certainly, personal journals, intentional conversations with learners, participant artifacts and critical friends are devices that can be employed broadly in OE/EE to target inquiries. Educators must also be able to revisit this information with theory with analytical tools like dialogue, poetry, and even curriculum writing, the latter of which often includes theoretical explanations and justifications. For example, in addition to these manuscripts, I borrowed theme writing models (Ham, 1992) from the field of environmental/heritage interpretation to help me alter the central messages of my program in light of my data.

However, because of the diversity of methods afforded to self-study, developing self-study as an OE/EE practice requires structural commitments in our field more than deliberation on specific research methods. Therefore, the remainder of this section discusses how the field of OE/EE might promote a habit of self-study rather than how individual educators might accomplish self-study.

Ultimately, self-study is a challenging practice to implement not because it is inherently so but because the socio-political systems that govern education do not create favorable

conditions for teacher research. In formal education few teachers are given space to cultivate inquiry in their practice, likely because American educational policy has tried to standardize so much curriculum. In delineating challenges to self-study Kroll (2012) states:

The U.S. Department of Education has accepted very limited models of research, as the goal has been to search for universal cures to the ills of the U.S. schooling systems. The assumption underlying this goal is that there is one best way to teach children, and that this universal truth can be discovered through scientific research (p. 132).

Policy derived from this rationale assumes that the standardized curriculum created by a small group of experts improves the lives of all students; therefore, teachers are expected to place this curriculum delivery and metrics of content achievement above their concern for student well-being, which ultimately makes the ontological stance impossible. Effectively, the nuances and multiplicities provided by self-study are not of value to universal truths of practice.

Therefore, I am certainly not the first to argue that norming self-study in education requires broader social/cultural shifts including investing in education systems, reducing teacher workloads, validating multiple metrics of teacher performance, and ultimately easing the fixation on content-based outcomes.

Many of the constraints and value systems that make self-study difficult in formal education are also applicable to OE/EE. Almost no nonformal educators have excess time in their work and funding for any kind of OE/EE research that is not explicitly measured by content-based metrics is comparatively difficult to locate. Often OE/EE organizations have to make significant accommodations in order to meet mandates outlined by grants and state agencies, very few of which ask these organizations to attend to the knowledge that outdoor and environmental educators gain through experience. In light of the racism and whiteness embedded in OE/EE, this lack of reflexive opportunities supports colonial hegemonies. Grappling with these issues means a broader restructuring of the systems that govern OE/EE and the values that underpin them. Ultimately I believe we must first cultivate a strong base of

self-study advocacy in our professional communities via more discussions of reflexivity in research institutions, the OE/EE organizations that we work for, and the extremely vibrant professional organizations that guide our field (e.g. the North American Association for Environmental Education, the National Association for Interpretation, the Association for Experiential Education).

However, OE/EE also brings a unique set of circumstances for self-study. One of the greatest challenges for a habit of inquiry in nonformal education is that, while most of the energy for self-study in K-12 education emanates from teacher-education, there are only a few higher education programs that prepare students for OE/EE employment, and many OE/EE professionals arrive in this work with a background in non-education disciplines like ecology, biology, emergency medicine, or business. While this diversity and fluidity of training is often a strength for our field, it places the burden of developing inquiry habits on OE/EE organizations like non-profits, state/federal public land agencies, and nature centers instead of higher education and academic institutions. Therefore, opportunities for reflexivity might be one more reason for the expansion of OE/EE higher education programs.

Still, professional development and entry-level preparation is certainly not absent in the field of OE/EE. Internships, apprenticeships, training, and probationary periods are extremely common and many of these experiences already employ tools that can be co-opted by self-study including educator journals and group reflections. Using this infrastructure to develop inquiry requires that OE/EE organizations hire or train supervisory staff who can be mentors and guides in ontological reflection, which in turn, necessitates that these leaders are continually engaging with their practice reflexively. In this way, organizations must develop diversity, equity and justice informed habits of inquiry as much as individual educators.

Yet this notion of organizational inquiry also exposes the weakest part of my self-study process; my research tended to revolve around my personal growth and therefore gave little attention to my employing organization. This is unsurprising considering the degree to which

individual pedagogical inquiries and personal theories are emphasized in the self-study literature. Yet this individualism risks treating an educator's practice as a break from the rest of the world, which may contradict the student-centered ontology that self-study promotes. Self-study that does not build shared ontologies of practice elevates the individual while ignoring the significant influences of community. For this reason, in the self-study community there is a strong push for 'collaborative self-study,' where the processes of inquiry and interpretation are shared by multiple practitioners in a setting (Samaras, 2011). Yet this may not be a movement towards a different methodology, but a shift towards valuing the collaboration that is inherent to all good self-studies, which partner critical friends, students, and theorists with practitioners.

OE/EE is in an ideal position to engage in collaborative inquiry models. While co-teaching is less common and often difficult for many K-12 teachers, it has always been inherent to OE/EE if only for safety reasons. Rarely do outdoor and environmental educators enter the field without a co-leader and within these partnerships hierarchies are uncommon. For this reason, experienced outdoor and environmental educators tend to be experts in making collaborative decisions.

Yet in my argument for the benefits of self-study to OE/EE I positioned the environment and entities of place as important relational agents in the ontologies of our practice. Therefore, educators and organizations taking on collaborative self-study should consider how the places we work within are also collaborators and participants, which in turn asks us to share ontology with place. Questions that need to be answered include: what do different entities of place want from our programs? What do participants learn from place that improves their lives? How do we ensure that entities of place have opportunities to teach their lessons? As I answered these questions with my employing organization, it became apparent that reciprocity was a key component missing in my program's treatment of place. Therefore, like-minded organizations may be likely to produce pedagogy with service learning and advocacy projects, which are not extremely common in OE/EE but are more representative of the shift towards 'place-responsive

outdoor education' that has characterized OE/EE for the last several years (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). Certainly OE/EE that includes reciprocity with place is more attentive to the ontological impacts that Lotz-Sisitka (2009) and the broader field of OE/EE seek.

### **Conclusion**

OE/EE fields are moving in the direction of critical reflexivity particularly as educators and organizations become more aware of their role in curtailing and promoting social justice. Foundational OE/EE concepts like wilderness and environmentalism are embedded in settler colonial conflicts. Therefore, our (i.e. outdoor and environmental educators) relationships to learners and place can be complex and implicate socio-cultural hegemonies that have resulted in the ongoing genocide of native peoples, the marginalization of environmental values derived from POC and urban lived-experience (e.g. environmental justice), and the disruption of too many ecosystems. Because of this, we cannot imagine ourselves as gatekeepers or experts of environmental connection as I have so frequently done in my career as an educator. Instead we must find pedagogical strategies that acknowledge our own unique entanglements in these conflicts, direct the skills and knowledge we do have towards justice aims, and provide ample room for multiple environmental value systems with special attention to those that counter dominant settler-colonial narratives.

I have proposed self-study as one tool in the development of such education. The self-study conceptualization that I've outlined here is an initial step in the development of habits of inquiry, which are necessary not only to confront the bias and discriminating assumptions that are at the foundational to outdoor concepts, but also to invent, practice and scrutinize anti-oppressive and justice-oriented environmental curricula. Like engineers who theorize, design, test, and retheorize their projects, self-study is a means by which educators can question the values that inform their practice and in response, design and test curricula aligned to reconceptualized values.

While there is potential for self-study to answer diverse practitioner inquiries, it is especially well situated to handle these questions about social justice and anti-oppression because of its ontological stance and subsequently, its focus on relationships. Not only are OE/EE fields filled with concepts that crave deeper ontological analysis especially ‘connection to nature’ and ‘relating to place’ but they engage a unique web of social and ecological relationships; outdoor educators have responsibility for the well-being of both their participants and the places in which we do our work. Therefore, the ontological stance requires that practitioners think deeply about how our work serves both learners and place, and in light of this thinking, commits us to implementing pedagogy that improves well-being for both. Yet, when we inform self-study with environmental justice, social justice, anti-colonial, and decolonizing theory, it becomes clear that educators should not see themselves as neutral agents in this web, but as active social actors with performative and discursive influence. Through such inquiry, outdoor and environmental educators should consider the specific learners and places that they work with, understand how they both benefit from and are hurt by systems that decrease the well-being of these learners and places, and how they are connected to the well-being of these learners and places. This is not something that is reproducible across places and peoples, but specific to organizations and individual educators. Self-study methodology revolves around this kind of personal inquiry.

There is no ‘how-to’ for doing self-study; this research occurs across diverse degrees of formality and requires researchers to tailor their methods to their inquiry. While practitioners pursuing inquiry certainly benefit from training in specific skills like field-journaling, coding, survey instrumentation, and interviewing, it is as important that educators and organizations are able to make decisions about when and how to use these methods. Therefore, promoting habits of inquiry come as much from supporting practitioners as they play and experiment with the role of researcher as they do from training. If self-study is going to be useful in OE/EE, our fields must implement structural changes that validate practitioner inquiry. I have suggested that this

commitment might manifest as inquiry support material through our professional development organizations and the requirement of self-study in outdoor or environmental teacher training/education, but many other opportunities to promote inquiry may exist at different levels of influence. Importantly, the organizations, researchers, and educators that populate our field should be encouraged to complexly analyze their ontology. This means discussing what it is that learners and places are asking for and what common goals emerge from an educator-learner-place triad.

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## DISSERTATION CONCLUSION

The professional dilemma from which my self-study originated, began with my sense that my outdoor education goals, which were largely informed by conventions of outdoor and environmental education (OE/EE), did not seem to resonate with my OE participants. Generally, I struggled to get them to ‘appreciate’ the outdoors the way I wanted and posited that this had something to do with major differences in life experience, especially my access to white privilege, and their experiences with racial/class marginalization. Yet an important turn in my work occurred as I began to see participant’s connection to nature not as a privilege that they didn’t have, but reflective of a divergent set of environmental values that are marginalized by broader environmental movements. Subsequently, I began to adjust my practice in what I perceived to be critical, justice oriented, and anti-oppressive ways. Still, I remained unsure about what my OE program could provide participants that would better their life experience. Therefore, I took the space offered by my dissertation to explore the potential of a ‘critical outdoor education’ (COE) through a self-study methodology, which is specifically used to help educators grapple with quandaries and confusions in their practice.

Each of the three manuscripts offered here takes a distinct approach to this broad professional dilemma, and each has its own inquiry and set of objectives. In the following sections, I will summarize each problem and analysis before briefly offering a synthesis.

### **Summary of Inquiries and Analyses**

#### ***Chapter 1- City Kids in the Wilderness: Action research for Critical Outdoor Education***

Here I use an action research framework and discourse analysis to better theorize my social justice and anti-oppressive curriculum design, which I call a ‘critical outdoor education’ (COE). Action research is used to study social processes, particularly as people and organizations undergo changes. It considers decisions, realizations and theoretical shifts rather than the inputs and outputs. The inquiry in chapter 1 specifically sought to characterize the

meaning we (i.e. my participants, my co-workers, and I) make through this evolving curriculum so that educators can draw implications for the practice of COE.

Through data analyses, I uncovered two types of discourses in my program. Pervasive discourses helped participants make meaning of the experience before, during, and after the trip and are easily traced to broader discourses surrounding American outdoors. Conversely, counter discourses were shared shifts in perception of the outdoors. Generally, counter discourses were less representative of discourse found in the larger field of OE.

When I interpreted this duality in my practice, I found that my curricular approach tended to situate counter discourses as resistive and opposed to pervasive discourse. In fact, the original names of these categories were 'dominant discourse' and 'subjugated discourse.' This habit of perceiving opposed dualities stems from my background in critical pedagogy, the rhetoric of which is common in much anti-oppressive literature. However, in doing this I positioned myself at a higher level of consciousness and subsequently, ignored the complexity of my participant's meaning making processes. As this problem became clearer in my research, I shifted towards strategies that placed participants in conversation with the entities involved in place, including indigenous nations, local settler communities, species, and other ecological agents. This decentered my singular interpretation of injustice and gave participants opportunities to conceptualize the complexity of place. In this way, the critical approaches of my work moved away from characterizing systems of oppression for participants and towards encouraging them to confront those relationships that are hidden by settler colonial projects. This theory and accompanying techniques have broader application to outdoor educators pursuing justice and anti-oppressive pedagogy, particularly as they encounter the influence of critical pedagogy.

## ***Chapter 2- Critical Identity Development in an Outdoor Educator***

Chapter two documents this same professional journey but approaches it from the perspective of my identity as an educator, rather than from my curriculum. Here I used

autoethnographic methodology and performativity theory to analyze my narrative with regards to the outdoors. Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe autoethnography as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p.739). In this way, my autoethnographic inquiry asks how the cultural context of outdoor fields constructs and changes my own oppressive and liberatory values as an outdoor educator. My analysis pays special attention to the ways I have performed whiteness in my OE work and considers how I can and do support justice through my interaction with my cultural context.

My narrative reveals a dynamic performativity. I was raised and validated by the values of wilderness adventure but, as I began to see how wilderness recreation enforced inequity, I shifted towards a performativity that I perceived as in line with more working class outdoor values and included hunting and agriculture. This is when I began to remove some of the traditional goals from my OE program and started talking to my participants about their own marginalization in the outdoors. When I began my doctoral studies, I was exposed to multiple environmental value systems and this is when I first acknowledged different outdoor performativities as expressions of different values. Subsequently, I theorized a COE grounded in the idea that participants experienced different, not less, connection to nature. Ultimately this forced me to confront my own relationship to both participants and the places I work, the latter of which I have given far less attention. In this realization is a major lesson for outdoor educators: as we seek to incorporate justice and anti-oppression into our work, it is imperative that we consider how we enact identity with regards to place. Relationships with any place in the Americas implicate settler colonial cultural/political systems, and therefore we cannot see ourselves as simply positive or neutral agents in the defense of place. The ontological stance implores that we know when we benefit from systems that have harmed places and value place as an agent, rather than a topic, in our programs.

### ***Chapter 3- Self-study for Reflexivity in Outdoor and Environmental Education***

My final manuscript uses the first two chapters as well as methodological theory to make a case for the use of self-study in OE/EE. I argue that as we create anti-oppressive curriculum or best practices for social justice OE/EE, it is important that educators and organizations have tools for reflexivity. Not only are OE/EE fields filled with concepts that crave deeper ontological analysis especially ‘connection to nature’ and ‘relating to place,’ but they engage a unique web of social and ecological relationships; outdoor educators have responsibility for the well-being of both their participants and the places in which we do our work. Self-study is particularly well situated for this reflexivity because the ontological stance requires that practitioners think deeply about how our work serves both learners and place, and in light of this thinking, commits us to implementing pedagogy that improves well-being for both. Yet, when we inform self-study with environmental justice, social justice, anti-colonial, and decolonizing theory, it becomes clear that educators should not see themselves as neutral agents in this web, but as active social actors with performative and discursive influence. In this way, the ontological stance does not ask how educators can teach justice and anti-oppression, but how we might do justice and anti-oppression through our practice.

Through such inquiry, outdoor and environmental educators should consider the specific learners and places that they work with, understand how they both benefit from and are hurt by systems that decrease the well-being of these learners and places, and how they are connected to the well-being of these learners and places. Self-study methodology revolves around this kind of personal inquiry.

#### **A Pause in the Construction of Critical Outdoor Education**

Following the example of Noel Gough (2007), whose rhizomatic complexity theory provided tremendous guidance for this project, I’d like to finish my dissertation with a pause, rather than a conclusion. Pauses are a rhizomatic alternative to conclusions because they acknowledge the potential for multiple extant points of growth in non-linear directions.



Ultimately, pauses are one part of writing to challenge positivism in educational research, which is why I find it appropriate for a dissertation that resists objectivity and statistical evaluation. Gough calls this “writing starfish instead of snake (p. 80),” although he acknowledges that academics generally do not do this well. In practical terms, this means that, rather than assert needs or delineate research trajectories, I will spend the next several paragraphs discussing my sense of connections among my and other’s visions for the future of my research as well as for the field of OE/EE, with particular attention to my hopes and aspirations.

All three chapters arrive at a complex valuation of ‘place as teacher.’ Much of the theory behind this idea was guided by Bowers’ (2008) warning about generalizing systems of oppression in places. While American settler colonialism and the imperial cultures from which it originates have certainly disrupted justice and sustainability in all parts of the Americas, they have not done so identically across space. Furthermore, the cultural identity of the people subjugated by colonialism have diverse histories and value systems that create varied contexts. Because of this, determining what is ‘good’ for place in an ontological way is not easily accomplished. For instance, while we can say that decolonization is good, places, with all their conflicts, cultural narratives, and ecological relationships, force us to acknowledge that this might mean very different things in different locations. Moreover, while some things are glaringly colonial (e.g. statues of Christopher Columbus, broken treaties with indigenous nations), we might also struggle to find the philosophical boundaries of settler colonial influence; we cannot expect to universally categorize all technology, markets, industries, arts and developments as colonial or decolonial. Therefore, destabilizing settler colonialism through place-based education requires that participants not only explore the nuances of power in a place, but also situate themselves among diverse cultural influences. This allows them to blaze their way through their own ontology regarding place. In chapter one we see Miguel beginning to undertake this complexity for the Catskills:

I wouldn't say they [local communities] deserved [to be relocated in order to build the NYC reservoirs] it because no one deserves bad things in their life, but they kind of deserved it because that land wasn't really theirs, but then it also landed in the government's hands anyway.

Here Miguel strings multiple oppressions together, which, although I wish I had more tools to support him as he grapples with this complexity, I took as a success at the time.

In conceptualizing land education Tuck et al. (2014) believes that learners should "theorize pathways to living as separate sovereignties on shared territory" (p.19), which stands in contrast to Gruenewald's (2003) 'reinhabitation,' where entirely new inhabitations are imagined. After examining how critical pedagogy simplified my identity and my curriculum, I shifted towards Tuck et al.'s approach and produced the closest thing to a central conclusion for this dissertation: it is important for both learners and educators to theorize and re-theorize what it might mean to live among multiple sovereignties on shared territory.

This notion led me to one particular act that I've iterated in a diversity of ways across this dissertation: placing oneself and one's learners in conversation with diverse entities of place. This stands in contrast to other place-based conceptions where students learn about place or learn from place. In chapter one, I framed this as a curriculum strategy. Through journal entries and discussion, I found success in asking learners about what could be said or written to specific indigenous nations, the local communities, to species, or to the mountains themselves. In chapter two, I explored my own performativity and recognized that as an educator, I have not and have not been encouraged to conceptualize how I alter and enact identity for place. Acknowledging my own non-neutrality in contested place means I cannot channel my connection to nature to learners, but must instead work with entities of place that have been harmed by systems from which I have benefited. Working as an ally in this relationship means acknowledging my privilege, finding common reasons to invest in anti-oppression, and ultimately giving learners opportunities to learn from place without imposition of my values.

Finally, chapter three argues that non-neutral engagement with place is a needed component for reflexivity among outdoor and environmental educators. It is important that the way we relate to place in our pedagogy grapples with our relationships to specific iterations of settler colonialism.

As stated in the introduction, I believe this dissertation comes at an important time. Passion and desire for anti-racism, anti-oppression, and social justice are flooding the field in ways that fill me with tremendous hope. Yet it is also important that as we pursue diversity equity and justice, our work remains unpalatable to the racist and classist assumptions at the heart of OE/EE. I am deeply concerned about undertheorized and under-politicized approaches to both learners' and educators' connection to place. My conception of 'place as teacher' has helped me challenge oppression in my practice and I believe it can do so for others.

However, I also know that the exact processes that have helped me accomplish such theorizing and politicizing are not universals. Like Gough (2007), my attempts to write 'starfish' maintain much of the linear logical argumentation of 'snakes,' and my aspiration to inspire and provoke rather than argue for broad application of my pedagogical philosophy have not been entirely successful. I sincerely hope that you the reader recognize this flaw and find some means of correcting for it as you let this work impact you.

As a challenge to myself and to academia, I will leave you with two quotes about resisting systems and inquiry from the most influential theorist (a science fiction writer) in my life. While considering the politics of culture, the protagonist of Ursula K. LeGuin's (1969) *The Left Hand of Darkness* states: "to oppose something is to maintain it...you must go somewhere else; you must have another goal; then you walk a different road" (p. 126). In clarification, the protagonist later thinks: "to learn which questions are unanswerable, and *not to answer them*: this skill is most needful in times of stress and darkness" (p. 126). In a dissertation focused on articulating problems and pursuing meaning, I am left wondering how far down 'different roads'

my pedagogy takes me, which branches of my rhizomes thrive off of unanswerable questions, and what the roles of these questions are in my practice.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Participant pre- and post-program interview questions

*Note:* These interviews were semi-structured and conversational. The order of these questions was different for each interview. Questions that ask participants to clarify and expound their thoughts were asked but not written here.

##### ***Pre-program interview questions:***

- 1) Have you had other experiences in wilderness? How were those experiences?
- 2) What are your 3 favorite outdoor activities? Why? What do you like about them?
- 3) What are your 3 favorite activities to do in nature? Why? What do you like about them?
- 4) Why do you think Fiver sends you all on the wilderness trip?
- 5) How do you feel about the wilderness trip?
- 6) What do you think will be the most important parts of the trip? Why?
- 7) What do you hope to get out of the trip?
- 8) What will the trip teach you? How do you think it will teach that?
- 9) Is it important to preserve wilderness? Why?
- 10) What three words would you use to describe wilderness?

##### ***Post-program interview questions:***

- 1) What comes to mind when you think about wilderness?
- 2) Why do you think Fiver sends you all on the wilderness trip?
- 3) Has the wilderness trip been what you expected it to be?
- 4) What were the most important parts of the trip to you? Why?
- 5) Will you take any lessons away from the trip? What are they? What parts of the trip taught you these lessons?
- 6) What do you wish was different about the trip?
- 7) How am I doing? What am I doing well? What could I do better?

- 8) What are your 3 favorite outdoor activities? Why?
- 9) How would the trip have been different if we tried to do it in the city/your hometown?
- 10) Is it important to preserve the Catskill wilderness? Why?
- 11) Of the 12 fiver attributes, pick 1-2 that you think were most important to the trip. Why do you pick these?
- 12) Do you have any other thoughts that might help improve the wilderness program?
- 13) What haven't I asked about the wilderness trip that you think it is important to talk about?

## **Appendix B**

### **Staff semi-structured interview questions:**

- 1) What is/was your role in the wilderness program?
- 2) In your perspective, what is the purpose of the Fiver wilderness program?
- 3) How does the wilderness program accomplish these purposes? How did you help accomplish these purposes? How did I help accomplish these purposes?
- 4) What do you think are the most important parts of the wilderness program for enriching the lives of our youth? What can be added to the trip to enrich our participant's lives?
- 5) What needs to be changed about the trip?
- 6) Did the way I run the program meet your expectations about what the wilderness program is?
- 7) Do you have any other thoughts that might help improve my teaching or the wilderness program?



## **Appendix C**

### **Semi-structured journal prompts**

*Note:* the journal prompts were part of the dynamic nature of a curriculum that is in the midst of action research. Therefore, each session may have had different prompts.

The order of questions is chronological for each session. In this way, the flow of questions reflects the order of curriculum pieces.

#### ***Session 1 journal prompts***

When I hear the word “wilderness” I think...

What do you think about the honorable harvest?

Describe your relationship to the mountain.

By tomorrow evening, pick some aspect of the Catskills that you identify with and explain why you identify with it.

Describe your relationship to the Catskills.

#### ***Session 2 journal prompts***

When I hear the word “wilderness” I think of...

Write two or more expectations you have for each other, for how you will treat nature, and for how you will treat yourself while on the trip.

What do you think about the honorable harvest?

Describe your relationship to the mountain.

By tomorrow evening, pick some aspect of the Catskills that you identify with and explain why you identify with it.

Describe your relationship to the Delaware Nation of Oklahoma.

To many people the Catskills are a place to hike. To me the Catskills are...

#### ***Session 3 journal prompts***

When I hear the word “wilderness” I think of...

Write two or more expectations you have for each other, for how you will treat nature, and for how you will treat yourself while on the trip.

What do you think about the honorable harvest?

If nature was my family, what would be different in my life?

By tomorrow evening, pick some aspect of the Catskills that you identify with and explain why you identify with it.

Write a letter to the Delaware Nation in Oklahoma. What would you like to tell them about your relationship to them and to the Catskills?

To many people the Catskills are a place to hike. To me the Catskills are...

#### ***Session 4 journal prompts***

When I hear the word “wilderness” I think of...

Write two or more expectations you have for each other, for how you will treat nature, and for how you will treat yourself while on the trip.

What do you think about the honorable harvest?

If the mountain were a person, describe what kind of person they would be?

If nature was my family, what would be different in my life?

By tomorrow evening, pick some aspect of the Catskills that you identify with and explain why you identify with it.

Write a letter to the Delaware Nation in Oklahoma. What would you like to tell them about your relationship to them and to the Catskills?

Write a letter to the Catskill region about your time here.

**Tom Mackey**  
*A Research-Practitioner in  
Environmental and Outdoor Education*

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## Education and Distinctions

State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY ESF): Syracuse, NY

PhD. candidate in Environmental Education and Interpretation

Dissertation Working Title: *City Kids Reinhabiting Wilderness: Critical Approaches to Outdoor Pedagogy*

Anticipated defense: May 2020

Current all but  
dissertation  
candidate

Syracuse University: Syracuse, NY

Certificate of Advanced Studies in Food Studies

2018

Lynch School of Education: Boston College: Chestnut Hill, MA

Masters of Education in Secondary Biology Teaching,- Urban Context Specialty

Teaching English Language Learners Certificate

2013

Colgate University: Hamilton, NY

Bachelor of Arts in Educational Studies

*Honors in Educational Studies*

Bachelor of Arts in Biology

Distinction in the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum

Graduated Magna Cum Laude

2011

## University Teaching Appointments

SUNY Cortland: Cortland, NY

Dates: August 2019-present

**Instructor of Record**

**EST 100: Introduction to Environmental Studies**

Course Description: Teaches literacy in environmental topics including policy, economics, climate change, environmental justice, and indigenous ecological knowledge/land rights

Responsibilities:

- Design and teach 3 hours of lecture/week
- Create, deliver and grade quizzes, mock forums, and argumentative papers.

Bard College: Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

Date: January 2019

**Instructor of Record**

**MED 525: Place-Based Outdoor Education**

Course Description: Required course for a Masters in Environmental Education program. Experiential course exposes students to the diverse application of outdoor education techniques while supporting critical engagement with environmental and educational theory.

Responsibilities:

- Designed, taught, and coordinated a two-week January-term course including 50 hours of classroom instruction and 5 days of various field trips in and around the Hudson Valley.
- Maintained the safety of graduate students as they learn in backcountry settings.
- Assessed student curriculum plans and mock program deliveries.

## University Teaching Appointments Continued

SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry; Syracuse, NY

Dates: 2015-Present

**Instructor of Record; Fall 2018, 2019**

**EFB 312/512: Introduction to Personal Environmental Education and Interpretation Methods**

Course Description: Combines application of social/environmental critique with a focus on the practice of environmental education and interpretation including lesson planning and program delivery.

Responsibilities:

- Design and teach 2 hours of lecture/week and 3 sections of recitation (3 hrs/section)
- Assessed student lesson plan designs, mock program deliveries, papers, and quizzes.
- Supervise three undergraduate teaching assistants

**Instructor of Record; Summers 2017, 2019**

**EFB 404: Natural History Museums and Modern Science**

Course Description: Investigates the role of museums, monuments, and other exhibit spaces in the cultivation of knowledge concerning science, history and the environment.

Responsibilities:

- Designed, taught, and coordinated a two-week summer course including a 1-week field trip to Wash. DC
- Maintained the safety and well-being of ~12 undergraduate students as they travel to an unfamiliar city.
- Assessed in class assignments, papers, and museum design projects.

**Co-Instructor; Summers of 2016, 2018, 2019**

**EFB 202: Ecological Monitoring and Biodiversity Assessment**

Course Description: Employs field assignments in the Adirondack Park to introduce diverse skills required for scientific study of the environment.

Responsibilities:

- Designed and taught two days of coursework focused on professional nature journaling.

**Instructor of Record; Spring 2019, 2020**

**EFB 417/617: Non-Personal Environmental Interpretive Methods**

Course Description: A skills heavy experiential learning course that teaches introductory competencies in interpretive media design including brochures, waysides, social media, and video.

Responsibilities:

- Designed and taught 3 hours of lecture/week
- Assessed student wayside, brochure, and video projects for collaborating community partners.
- Supervised one graduate teaching assistant

**Instructor of Record; Spring 2018**

**EFB 480: Animal Behavior**

Course Description: Investigates general principles in the study of animal behavior with an added emphasis on the social implications of such knowledge, especially multicultural perspectives on animals.

Responsibilities:

- Designed and taught 3 hours of lecture/week
- Designed and coordinated 3 section of recitation
- Created, delivered and graded all student assessments.
- Supervised two graduate teaching assistants as they teach recitation sections

**Graduate Teaching Assistant; 2015-2018**

- Conducted 3-9 hours of classroom instruction per week for General Biology Lab (Fall 2015, Spring 2018), Animal Behavior (Spring 2016, 2017), and Introduction to Personal Interpretation (Fall 2016, 2017).

## Relevant Experience

The Fiver Children's Foundation; Earlville, NY/New York City

Dates: 2018-Present

**Wilderness Director; Summers 2012, 2013, 2017, 2018, 2019**

- Design, coordinate and teach 2-week outdoor education courses for teenagers living below the poverty line in New York City and Madison County, NY. This program centers environmental identity and explores environmental justice.

**Assistant Camp Director; Summer 2014**

- Provided behavior management support for all youth ages 8-18.
- Supervised curriculum development for camp programming
- Developed and implemented all camp scheduling.

**Character Education Specialist and Counselor; Summers 2010, 2011**

- Designed and taught curriculum related to identity, community, and self-worth to youth ages 8-18.

SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry

Dates: 2015-Present

**Graduate Peer Mentor; 2019**

- Built relationships with an assigned group of new graduate students and provided guidance in teaching, research logistics, and self-care

**Curriculum Specialist and Research Assistant; 2016-2017**

- Designed a middle school curriculum focusing on traditional ecological knowledge in Haudenosaunee territory for the Skā-noñh Great Law of Peace Center; Liverpool, NY.
- Assisted teachers in the implementation of this curriculum in their classroom.
- Planned and led school field trips to the Skā-noñh Great Law of Peace Center in Liverpool, NY.

**E-cybermission Fellow; 2016-2017**

- Worked with other graduate students to assist in the completion of science fair projects for middle-school students from Expeditionary Learning Middle School in Syracuse, NY.

**Graduate Assistant Colloquium Fellow; 2017**

- Worked with the outreach office to design and implement a three day colloquium for new graduate assistants who may have limited or no experience teaching at the graduate level.

Syracuse City School District; Syracuse, NY

Dates: 2014-2015

**8<sup>th</sup> Grade Science Teacher, Danforth Middle School**

- Created, prepared and taught daily biology lessons aligned to Common Core and State Standards in a state designated "high needs" urban school.

Ecumenical Social Action Committee; Boston, MA

Dates: January-June 2014

**Teacher, GED Plus**

- Created and taught daily lesson plans for all high school equivalency subjects to youth who did not succeed in traditional education settings in Boston, but are continuing secondary education.
- Supported academic expression, reflection, and argumentation in youth from urban environments.

The West Roxbury Academy; Boston, MA

Dates: 2012-2013

**Teaching Practicum**

- Designed and taught a biology curriculum for two year long classes at a Boston public school.

The International Wolf Center; Ely MN

Dates: 2011- 2012

**Educator**

- Designed and delivered customized programs for school and other groups that came to the center with specific educational goals concerning wolves and wolf issues; Implement projects that improve the didactic quality of center spaces.

## Workshops Facilitated

*Indigenous and Western Science: Can we Learn to See with Both Eyes Workshop*

Location #1: Lexington, KY- North American Association of Environmental Education Annual Conference  
October 17, 2019

Location#2: SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, Syracuse, NY

April 2019, November 2018

Future Location: Hamilton, NY- New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation;  
Division of Park Educators Meeting  
March 2020

*Race and Outdoor Education: From Inclusion to Transformation*

Location: New York State Outdoor Education Association  
July 2019

*The Thanksgiving Address for Teachers: Teaching Haudenosaunee Environmental Perspectives*

Location: Skā•noñh- Great Law of Peace Center, Liverpool, NY  
August 2017, 2019

## Conference Presentations

### Presenter

Presentation Title: *City Kids in the Woods: Critical Approaches to Wilderness Education*  
Education for a Just and Sustainable Future

North American Association of Environmental Education Annual Conference; Lexington, KY October  
16-19, 2019

### Panelist

Panel Title: *Human Rights Research Applications in Agriculture Education, Food Policy, and Urban Design*  
Scarborough Fare: Global Foodways and Local Foods in a Transnational City

Association for the Study of Food and Society Annual Conference; Toronto, ON June 22-25, 2016

## Published Materials

The ecology and history of Onondaga Lake: The Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address as a pathway to  
stewardship education in the Onondaga Lake Watershed (2017)

*Middle School Curriculum*

An EPA funded project of SUNY ESF, Syracuse University and the Skā•noñh – Great Law of Peace Center  
<http://sustainability.syr.edu/academics/exploring-haudenosaunee-and-scientific-perspectives/>

## Manuscripts in Progress

Manuscripts comprising current doctoral dissertation:

- *City Kids Reinhabiting the Wilderness: A Self-Study of Critical Approaches to Outdoor Pedagogy*
- *An Auto-Ethnographic Analysis of White Performativity in Decolonizing Outdoor Education*
- *Self-Study Methods in Outdoor Education*

## Board/Committee Positions

New York State Outdoor Education Association; Diversity Committee member since 2019

Friends of Beaver Lake Nature Center; board member since 2018



### Certifications

Current Wilderness First Responder; Expires June 2022  
NYS Outdoor Guides Association Water Safety for Guides Certification; lifetime certification  
Certified in the use of Projects WET, WILD and Learning Tree for school-age programs

### Professional Memberships

World Environmental Education Congress Network (WEEC)	Summer 2018- Present
North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE)	Spring 2018- Present
New York State Outdoor Education Association (NYSOEA)	Spring 2018- Present